

TOS 104



# British Birds

August 2014 • Vol.107 • 439–496



NATURAL HISTORY  
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ZEISS



300015693

# British Birds

Established 1907, incorporating The Zoologist, established 1843

Published by BB 2000 Limited, trading as 'British Birds'

Registered Office: c/o McPhersons CFG Limited, 23 St Leonards Road  
Bexhill on Sea, East Sussex TN40 1HH

ISSN 0007-0335

[www.britishbirds.co.uk](http://www.britishbirds.co.uk)

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## Annual subscription rates

Individual subscriptions: UK – £53.00

Overseas (airmail) – £60.00

Libraries and agencies – £99.00

## Back issues

available from [www.britishbirds.co.uk](http://www.britishbirds.co.uk)

or the subscriptions office.

Printed by Hastings Printing Company

*British Birds* is owned and published by BB 2000 Limited, the directors of which are John Eyre (Chairman),

Mark Holling, Conor Jameson, Ciaran Nelson, Ian Packer, Adrian Pitches.

BB 2000 Limited is wholly owned by The British Birds Charitable Trust (registered charity

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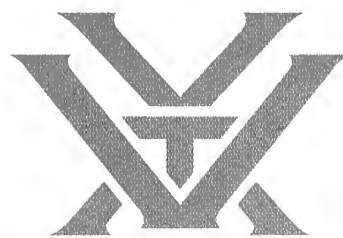
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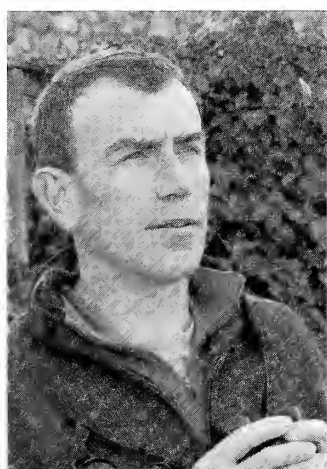




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The Spoon-billed Sandpiper is one of the world's most recognisable birds, and every birdwatcher in Britain will be aware of the race to save it from extinction. In this issue, Nigel Clark and his colleagues present an update on an extraordinary conservation story, which will surely become a classic example of the benefits of global partnerships if the project is successful. *BB* is proud to be supporting that effort in a modest way. The description of the many hurdles – any of which could have scuppered a successful outcome completely – to negotiate in order to establish a conservation breeding flock at Slimbridge is fascinating. I'm writing this while marooned in thick fog on Fair Isle – the risk of aircraft being grounded by fog for days or even weeks was just one of the potential problems of transporting Spoon-billed Sandpiper eggs back to the UK from the Russian Far East. Here on Fair Isle, even in the fog I can hear the call notes of Arctic-breeding waders making their way south; half a world away, Spoon-billed Sandpipers will be making a similar journey, to discover which of their stopover sites have avoided the long arm of the developers for another year.

*Roger Riddington*



**British Birds aims to:** ❖ provide an up-to-date magazine for everyone interested in the birds of the Western Palearctic; ❖ publish a range of material on behaviour, conservation, distribution, ecology, identification, movements, status and taxonomy as well as the latest ornithological news and book reviews; ❖ maintain its position as the journal of record; and ❖ interpret scientific research on birds in an easily accessible way.

## Is urban birding the future?

Show me a city and I will show you birds. It may seem like a boastful claim but it's the truth. Birds are everywhere, if you open your eyes and your mind to it – even in the heart of a concrete jungle. If you look beyond the steel, the concrete and the hordes of people and visualise the urban terrain as a range of bird-friendly habitats, then you have become an urban birder.

Believing that birds are everywhere, regardless of location, is my mantra. It was born out of my city childhood, languishing (or so I thought) in an urban desert, missing out on the real birds that existed in abundance outside London's limits. Delving through my eagerly awaited copies of *Bird Life*, the membership magazine of the Young Ornithologists' Club, did little to quell my early beliefs that most birds occurred only outside cities. I stared longingly at the monotone images of Marsh Harriers *Circus aeruginosus*, Avocets *Recurvirostra avosetta* and Great Grey Shrikes *Lanius excubitor*, wishing for an opportunity to see any one of them for real. I felt trapped, like the Silver Surfer, the Marvel comic superhero imprisoned on earth by an invisible force field that repelled his attempts to burst through and roam outer space. With no-one willing to take me out to the hallowed countryside, I felt forever condemned to a city life with just House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* and Feral Pigeons *Columba livia* to keep me company.

But, as it happened, I had far more avian company than I thought. When I came across a copy of Heinzel, Fitter & Parslow's *Birds of Britain and Europe with North Africa and the Middle East* at my local library, I quickly learnt that many of the birds that I thought of as being exclusively rural were in fact alive and well in my urban neighbourhood. Armed with this revised perception of the city's avian possibilities, I wandered around my immediate vicinity with a fresh perspective. I found flocks of wintering Tree Sparrows *P. montanus*, watched the passage of groups of Northern Lapwings *Vanellus vanellus* overhead during late summer and, a little

further up the road but still within an urban setting, discovered Common Pheasants *Phasianus colchicus* and Red-legged Partridges *Alectoris rufa*. I was literally surrounded by great birds that I could only see once I had opened my mind to them. I was so grateful to my initial field guide that I decided to keep hold of it. Naughty I know, but that book has remained in my possession ever since!

To be honest, it has taken me years to get to grips with the idea of urban birding. To start with, I had to convince myself of its merits before contending with disbelieving fellow birders who were still slavishly attached to the thought that birding in a city was the equivalent of ornithological suicide. I once subscribed to that same school of thought, religiously spending my weekends in Norfolk or chasing rarities around the southeast. Yet, to me, urban birding is one of the most exhilarating forms of birding going. Finding a patch in the middle of urbanity and then visiting it regularly is an eye-opening experience. My local patch is Wormwood Scrubs in deepest west London. I have been birding there for over 20 years and at first I had the rise taken out of me by my birding mates for choosing to patronise such an urban backwater. It had never previously featured in any of the *London Bird Reports* and was completely missing from the birding radar. Yet, within the first few days of my first autumn, my newly adopted site yielded a couple of migrant Pied Flycatchers *Ficedula hypoleuca*, a Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* and a Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*! Those migrants, along with the resident Linnets *Linaria cannabina*, Bullfinches *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* and plentiful Song Thrushes *Turdus philomelos*, were enough to get me hooked. Thereafter, I resisted the temptation to chase rarities, even if they landed at the lavish London Wetland Centre, literally a couple of miles down the road. My thinking has always been that if there is a rarity anywhere in the country, then it could turn up at my patch.

Over the years, The Scrubs has more than



repaid my dedication. For example, I discovered a small summering population of Meadow Pipits *A. pratensis*, which have turned out to be the closest breeders to central London. According to the *London Bird Report*, my patch consistently has the most pairs of breeding Lesser Whitethroats *Sylvia curruca* and Linnets in London. It also has a good line-up of rarities including arguably Britain's first record of wintering Common Redstart, no fewer than three Richard's Pipits *A. richardi*, an Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana* and, last autumn, a Common Rosefinch *Erythrina erythrina*. And it receives more than its fair share of migrants including biannual Ring Ouzels *T. torquatus*, Common Redstarts and Northern Wheatears *Oenanthe oenanthe*.

Wormwood Scrubs is no amazing urban wilderness; it is a large park dominated by playing fields with no standing water and is surrounded by industry and housing. It is, however, a shining example of how urban areas are more than capable of attracting interesting and varied birdlife. Watching almost any urban patch will be rewarding. More importantly, it shows that you don't have to live next to a nature reserve in the middle of the countryside to enjoy good birding: you can find the most amazing things in the least expected places. For me, nothing beats the thrill of coming across an unexpected species within a city environment. I will never forget recording my first Stock Dove *Columba oenas* at my patch or seeing the first House Sparrow on my street in ten years. There was also the Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis* that I watched fishing alongside the Southbank one summer and the Honey-buzzard *Pernis apivorus* I gawped at as it winged its way north across central London, not to mention the Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* preening in a Turkey Oak *Quercus cerris* on my patch. The experiences are many and, as with birding in general, no two days are alike.

Over 80% of the British population lives in urban areas and, despite the pessimistic view to the contrary, the truth is that there is no city in the country that is devoid of birdlife. This is even true of the urban centres of places like Milton Keynes, Hull and

Croydon, all of which famously hold no great architectural promise and have been publicly lambasted for allegedly being devoid of all feathered life. To all those who doubt the worth of checking out an inner-city site, I implore them to grab a pair of binoculars and take a good look around. Perhaps more importantly, urban birding is a great way to engage city folk into the wonders of birds and nature. You only have to visit an urban Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* watchpoint to witness it, the wonder on the faces of people seeing those magnificent falcons for the first time. It is up to us to encourage these folk to develop their interest and knowledge of birds. Indeed, it's the people in the urban areas who we need to get on board to bolster the numbers of conservationists ready to lend their voices in battle to save species like the Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* from extinction as breeders in the UK. Many of us living in urban areas have lost our connection with nature. I have found that taking people for a walk around their area will open their eyes to the hitherto unnoticed nature that flourishes around them.

My message to all you city dwellers stuck in the cycle of escaping to the country every weekend is simple: get out there, find an urban patch and study it. Speak to the locals and share your passion. Tell them about the birds that nest there and about the ones that pass through and soon those people will spread that information on to their friends. In time, your patch may become a local focal point for those interested in wildlife. When that happens, your job will be done. Oh, and one last thing: keep looking up!

*David Lindo, The Urban Birder*



What do you think? Join the debate at [www.britishbirds.co.uk/category/editorials](http://www.britishbirds.co.uk/category/editorials)

# News and comment

Compiled by Adrian Pitches

Opinions expressed in this feature are not necessarily those of *British Birds*

## Phil Hollom, 1912–2014

Phil Hollom, one of the giants of twentieth-century British ornithology, has died after a long and very productive life at the age of 102.

His ornithological curriculum vitae is a timeline of all the key developments in the study of British birds since the 1930s and includes: the Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* survey of 1931, which was a forerunner of the British Trust for Ornithology and its census work; the landmark *Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe* co-authored with Roger Tory Peterson and Guy Mountfort and first published in 1954; his own *Popular Handbook of British Birds* (1952) and the

*Popular Handbook of Rarer British Birds* (1960).

Phil gave 20 years' service to *British Birds*, being part of the editorial board from 1951 to 1972 (and senior editor from 1960 to 1963), and he was the first chairman of the British Birds Rarities Committee, formed in 1959. It was under his chairmanship that the thorny issue of the Hastings Rarities was finally grasped, in 1962. A further colossal achievement was helping to steer the *Birds of the Western Palearctic* juggernaut during its lengthy publication journey.

A full obituary will appear in *BB* in due course.

## Hen Harriers and grouse shooting

As Mark Avery's e-petition for a ban on driven grouse shooting (*Brit. Birds* 107: 384) continues to attract support (8,000 signatures and counting), Hen Harrier Day will be observed on Sunday 10th August at moorland sites across the north of England by birders determined to draw attention to the parlous plight of this magnificent raptor. (See [www.birdersagainst.org](http://www.birdersagainst.org) Birders Against Wildlife Crime).

Outrage will have been stoked by news from north of the border, released by RSPB Scotland a year after the event, of a co-ordinated harrier shoot on a moor in the Cairngorms National Park. RSPB Scotland said: "There was a shocking

incident last year, unreported until now, in which a male Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* was apparently shot in the eastern Cairngorms, within the boundary of the Cairngorms National Park.

'Two outraged members of the public contacted Police Scotland on 30th May last year after witnessing what they described as a co-ordinated "hunt" on the moor, ending in the shooting of the protected bird of prey. They explained how they watched for almost three hours as two individuals, armed with shotguns, criss-crossed the moor, with at least one other individual directing them by radio from his vehicle to the location of where the bird was seen perched.'

An investigation by Police Scotland was launched but failed to turn up sufficient further evidence to charge anyone in connection with the incident.

RSPB Scotland says that grouse-moor managers and gamekeepers must do more to prevent illegal persecution, following a 20% decline in the Scottish Hen Harrier population between 2004 and 2010. Effective and legal techniques,



220. Female Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*.

Tony Hamblin/FLPA



such as diversionary feeding (providing an alternative food source to grouse chicks), have been proven to reduce the predation of Red Grouse *Lagopus lagopus* by Hen Harriers and should be more widely embraced, the charity says.

Meanwhile, conspiracy theorists may wish to ponder the departure of Simon Barnes from *The Times* at the end of June, as highlighted by Mark Avery in his blog. Barnes was the paper's chief sports writer and also wrote on wildlife and countryside issues (he also has a column in the RSPB

magazine) and his redundancy from the newspaper of the establishment came just days after another trenchant piece about Hen Harriers and grouse shooting. Here's an excerpt: 'The grouse industry needs to take a greater responsibility and, overall, it has shown no tendency to do so in terms of cutting down illegal behaviour, managing more responsibly or taking in the interests of the wider public...'

Have those gunning for the Hen Harrier started shooting the messenger too?

## Happier harrier news

A glimmer of good news reported by the RSPB in June concerns three active Hen Harrier nests in England this year following a blank year for young harriers fledged in 2013.

On the United Utilities Bowland Estate in Lancashire there were two active nests, while a third pair nested at 'another location in England'. Bowland used to be the English stronghold for Hen Harriers, indeed the bird is the symbol of the Forest of Bowland Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. However, the current nests represent the first breeding attempts in the area since 2011.

The RSPB, in partnership with Natural England and United Utilities, has monitored and protected Hen Harriers in Bowland for more than three decades. Both nests are being watched by dedicated staff and volunteers, as well as CCTV around the clock.

The RSPB and the local shooting tenant used diversionary feeding in Bowland, under licence from Natural England.

You can read a blog by the RSPB's 'night protection staff' at Bowland here: [www.rspb.org.uk/community/ourwork/skydancer/b/skydancer/archive/2014/06/24/thoughts-from-a-night-watchman.aspx](http://www.rspb.org.uk/community/ourwork/skydancer/b/skydancer/archive/2014/06/24/thoughts-from-a-night-watchman.aspx)

Also in June, RSPB launched a campaign calling for licensing of grouse moors; see [www.rspb.org.uk/community/ourwork/b/martinharper/archive/2014/06/26/our-uplands.aspx](http://www.rspb.org.uk/community/ourwork/b/martinharper/archive/2014/06/26/our-uplands.aspx). This is rather ironic as the e-petition launched by former RSPB staffer John Armitage last year (see *Brit. Birds* 106: 185) calling for grouse-moor licensing was NOT publicly endorsed by RSPB and failed to attract the requisite 100,000 signatures (one-tenth of RSPB membership) needed to trigger a Parliamentary debate.

## The Scottish Naturalist and The Western Naturalist – free online access

Over the years *The Scottish Naturalist* and *The Western Naturalist* have published a great many important papers, as well as notes and obituaries documenting the history and development of Scottish natural history. Latterly, the journals had limited circulation and access has been difficult for anyone who did not receive their own printed copies or have a nearby library with a set of the journal(s).

*The Scottish Naturalist*, in its present form, ceased publication in 2011. It is now to be replaced by a free online journal, which welcomes articles, long or short, on any aspect of Scottish natural history in the broadest sense – see <http://thescottishnaturalist.org>

In a separate development, the Scottish Ornithologists' Club would like to make access to the full run of the journals available through the Biodiversity Heritage Library [www.biodiversitylibrary.org](http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org), which already offers free access to a vast amount of historical books and journals (if you're not already familiar with the BHL, it's well worth exploring). Authors, photographers and artists originally submitted material to these two Scottish journals for print publication. It is now impracticable to trace all the individual contributors but if any copyright holder does not wish to have their material included in free digital access, they are asked to contact [mail@the-soc.org.uk](mailto:mail@the-soc.org.uk) as soon as possible, preferably before 1st December 2014.

## The value of vultures

One of the online stories that caught the eye on the N&c desk this month is this one, which is an excerpt from Tony Juniper's book, *What Has Nature Ever Done For Us?* This section, on the value of vultures, suggests that nearly 50,000 people are estimated to have died because of the disappearance of the vultures (in southern Asia). Remarkable too is the estimated impact on India's economy. Between 1993 and 2006 the loss of the vultures was estimated to have cost the country about \$34 billion. It's worth a read... <http://ensia.com/voices/the-value-of-vultures>

## 25th anniversary Birdfair

It started with one marquee in a field in 1989... And 25 years later it's a global success story raising £250,000+ every year for bird conservation.

The 25th anniversary British Birdwatching Fair is at Rutland Water on 15th–17th August and *British Birds* will be in its usual place in Marquee 3 (stands 24 and 25). Please come and say hello to the *BB* team – and encourage your non-subscriber friends to drop by too, as we have a fantastic subscription offer running during Birdfair.

This year's fair is raising funds for BirdLife's

marine programme. Seabirds have a much higher proportion of threatened species than landbirds – and the vast majority of the oceanic realm, including key feeding areas, has no statutory protection whatever. The funds from the fair will enable the BirdLife Partnership to work with national governments and international bodies to create a network of marine protected areas. These areas will not only conserve seabirds, but will also help to protect marine mammals and fish stocks.

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## Collectibles for Conservation: how the Penny Black might help to save the Spoon-billed Sandpiper

*Collectibles for Conservation* is an enterprising new scheme to raise funds for conservation. It brings together BirdLife's Preventing Extinctions Programme – surely one of the most worthy of conservation initiatives – and Cover Story, specialists in philatelic items (everything from stamp collections through to holiday postcards).

The idea is simple – if you have collectibles gathering dust at the back of a cupboard or in the bottom of a drawer, why not turn them into conservation action? Cover Story, founded in 1996 by Daniel Mirecki, himself a BirdLife Species Champion, is providing its expertise free of charge, and will aim to secure the best value from any collectibles that are donated to the scheme.

In addition to postal items, *Collectibles for Conservation* will embrace old photographs, ephemera, coins, banknotes and medals. The majority of items donated will be sold through auction with proceeds coming directly to BirdLife. For higher-value items, donors will be advised of the likely value wherever possible prior to auction.

The scheme was launched in spring 2014, in *World Birdwatch* (BirdLife's quarterly magazine for members). BirdLife Global Programme Development Manager Jim Lawrence told N&C: 'It is still early days but the response has already been pretty exciting. We've had several stamp albums and first-day-cover collections donated and received a rare 2,600-year-old silver coin from Afghanistan apparently called a "Partig" that is still being valued. The prize gift so far, though, has been a pristine thematic bird stamp collection in six volumes that has

already raised £3,200 at auction. Fifty years of dedicated collecting went into its compilation and yet it was just handed over to me with the comment "I hope my collecting efforts can now be converted into funding for your great work preventing extinctions."

'The beauty of this scheme is that it potentially releases conservation funds from long-forgotten items gathering dust deep in a drawer somewhere that have long lost anything other than sentimental value to the original owner. It's a simple way of making a real contribution.'

And you can get involved by sending any collectibles you wish to donate to: BirdLife c/o Collectibles for Conservation, BirdLife International, Welbrook Court, Girton Road, Cambridge, CB3 0NA. Better still, if you want to meet the experts in person, bring your collectibles to the Birdfair. Daniel Mirecki will be at the BirdLife stand (Marquee 6, stands 1–2) to receive items and/or comment on the value of your collectibles. It will be better than Antiques Roadshow! Not least because Jim will be handing out champagne to anyone who arrives with a Penny Black in decent nick...

To check whether any collectible items you own might be of interest and value before sending them to us as a donation, contact either Jim Lawrence [jim.lawrence@birdlife.org](mailto:jim.lawrence@birdlife.org) (01223 279 857) at BirdLife or, for specialised advice and valuations, Daniel Mirecki at Cover Story: [daniel\\_mirecki@talk21.com](mailto:daniel_mirecki@talk21.com) (0207 795 0133 or 0208 446 4422).

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## Great White Egrets continue to expand

Lukasz Ławicki, who produced the paper on the Great White Egret's *Ardea alba* expansion in Europe in *BB* earlier this year (see *Brit. Birds* 107: 8–25), reports continued expansion this summer, with the first breeding pairs (two) in Denmark, on the island of Saltholm (thanks to Iben Hove Sørensen from BirdLife Denmark for the information). This brings the number of European countries colonised by this species in the last 25 years to 15.



## BB grant for work on Spoon-billed Sandpipers

A BB grant of £1,000 has been awarded to a team of observers surveying the coastline at Rudong, in China's Jiangsu province. The importance of Rudong for Spoon-billed Sandpipers *Calidris pygmaeus* on migration was discovered only recently (see the paper in this issue, pp. 467–475), since which time more and more records have come from this site – currently, they could represent up to one-third of the remaining global population of this Critically Endangered species.

In 2014, the plan was for a team of local

ornithologists to conduct surveys of all waders 2–3 times per week throughout the two migration seasons. The findings should throw further light on the numbers of Spoon-billed Sandpipers and other waders using the area, their age composition, state of moult and turnover rate during the migration season. Resighting of colour-marked Spoon-billed Sandpipers is also important for assessing the species' survival rate. Learning more about the numbers of birds using the area may also help in the battle to save key areas from reclamation.

## Migration ecologist wins the Spinoza Prize

Theunis Piersma, world authority on the ecology of migratory birds, especially the Red Knot *Calidris canutus*, has been awarded the Spinoza Prize – the so-called 'Dutch Nobel Prize', which is the highest scientific award in the Netherlands. The prize comes with an award of €2.5 million, which will support Piersma's research at the University of Groningen.

This is an important boost for flyway conservation in general and waders in particular. Many populations currently face challenges through reclamation, hunting, climate change and other factors, all of which have an impact on extraordinary migratory journeys. Vogelbescherming Nederland (VBN, BirdLife in the Netherlands) and WWF-Netherlands are supporting Prof. Piersma by funding his chair in migratory bird ecology at Groningen, allowing him time to undertake his flyway-related work. Piersma and his team are part of the Global Flyway Network (GFN), an alliance of wader research groups from all over the world; VBN has supported the work of the GFN since 2007.

The Spinoza Prize will enable Theunis Piersma to study environmental factors influencing the growth phase of migratory birds. 'I think even in ecology the role of the environment has been underestimated,' he said. 'There's much more to migratory birds than just a genome. I enjoy embracing the fuzzy nature of ecology, especially if you then manage to see the bigger picture.'

For the conservation of migratory birds, which cross international borders and have to adapt to a changing environment, the ability to understand the bigger picture will be crucial in the future.

## Spanish Black-necked Grebes breeding in the UK

Next month's issue of BB contains the annual Rare Breeding Birds Panel's report on the fortunes of the UK's rarest breeders. One of the species concerned is Black-necked Grebe and we liked the recent excellent story on the BTO's bird ringing blog about some canny detective work that makes use of some exceptional digital photography to further our knowledge of our breeding Black-necked Grebe population. See <http://bit.ly/1k5WKuy>

## BB the Cuckoo, heading south again

By late June, BB, the tagged Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* sponsored by this journal, was heading back south from his Scottish homeland for the third year in a row with his satellite 'back-pack'. At the time of writing (mid July), BB was in northern Italy, having crossed the eastern part of the Alps. Follow his progress, and that of all the cuckoos, at [www.bto.org/cuckoos](http://www.bto.org/cuckoos)



BTO

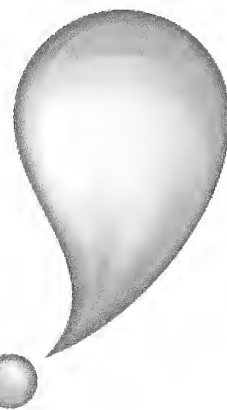
221. BB the Cuckoo, when tagged in June 2012.

**For extended versions of many of the stories featured here, and much more, visit our website [www.britishbirds.co.uk](http://www.britishbirds.co.uk)**

# Bird Photograph of the Year 2014

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Judging the *BB* Bird Photograph of the Year competition is always one of the highlights of the year. Now in its 38th year, the competition continues to flourish, with more entries than ever in both the main and digiscoping competition. This does not make the judging any easier, and 2014 was, perhaps, the closest competition for many years.

The judges gathered at the BTO's headquarters in Thetford on 22nd April 2014. Judging followed the traditional format: each image was viewed twice, after which an initial shortlist of about 50 entries was eventually decided upon. At this stage, the remaining images were examined with extra care, for sharpness and clarity, as well as any tell-tale indications of over-sharpening or other signs of excessive digital manipulation. To reach the final shortlist, all images that did not feature in at least one judge's provisional top-ten selection were removed. The final 20 images were, as ever, of the highest standard, and this year all were pretty closely matched. Each judge ranked the images in the final shortlist independently, to derive our overall results for this year, which are shown below.

## Sponsors

We remain enormously grateful to Anglian Water ([www.anglianwater.co.uk](http://www.anglianwater.co.uk)) for contin-

uing as our principal sponsor in 2014, maintaining the relationship between *BB* and Rutland Water – where, at the British Birdwatching Fair, the winning photographs have been displayed on the *BB* stand, and where the awards have been presented for many years now. In addition, our loyal supporters of many years, Christopher Helm/Bloomsbury ([www.bloomsbury.com](http://www.bloomsbury.com)) and HarperCollins ([www.harpercollins.co.uk](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk)), have maintained their support, while the Eric Hosking Charitable Trust ([www.erichoskingtrust.com](http://www.erichoskingtrust.com)) continues to encourage digiscoping as a medium for documenting birds and bird behaviour. Simon King ([www.simonkingwildlife.com](http://www.simonkingwildlife.com)) will once again present our awards to the winners. We thank all our sponsors – without them *BB* would not be able to host this competition – and look forward to working together again in the future.

The prizes for the winners will be presented at this year's British Birdwatching Fair on Friday 15th August. The top 12 images will be on show at our stand (Marquee 3, stands 24–25), where you can cast your vote to help decide the public's favourite image. Let's see whether you agree with us this year!

The rules and closing date for next year's

competition will be announced in January 2015 on our website [www.britishbirds.co.uk](http://www.britishbirds.co.uk) and in the journal.

The winning entries

The overall winner of the *British Birds* Bird Photograph of the Year 2014 is Edmund Fellowes’ captivating portrait of a preening Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* and its spectral reflection. This particular heron frequented the weir on the River Nith in Dumfries, Dumfries & Galloway, where over a period of several years it gradually became habituated to people. On 22nd September 2013, a beautiful bright morning, the heron flew onto the top of the weir and spent half an hour preening. With the river level quite low, the water flowed almost serenely over the weir, enhancing the reflected orange tones of the adjacent sandstone bridge that formed the backdrop to the bird. Contrasting sharply with, yet complementing, the oranges are the

midnight blues of the azure sky. And within this mix is the heron, wing-tip just skimming the water’s surface and head almost a perfect mirror image. The judges have viewed many images of Grey Herons over the years, but perhaps none has been as stunning as this one. Edmund is no stranger to this competition, being the overall winner in 2012 with a Goosander *Mergus merganser* that was also photographed by the weir in Dumfries.

In second place comes an extraordinarily powerful image of a first-winter Herring Gull *Larus argentatus* feeding in the surf along the Norfolk coast. The viewer is left in suspense – did the gull just manage to avoid the oncoming breaker, or did it succumb to a watery end? Taken by Ernie Janes on 5th February 2014, this image admirably illustrates the power of the waves and interplay of surf and bird, and has an almost surreal quality – appearing more like an oil painting than a picture from a camera.

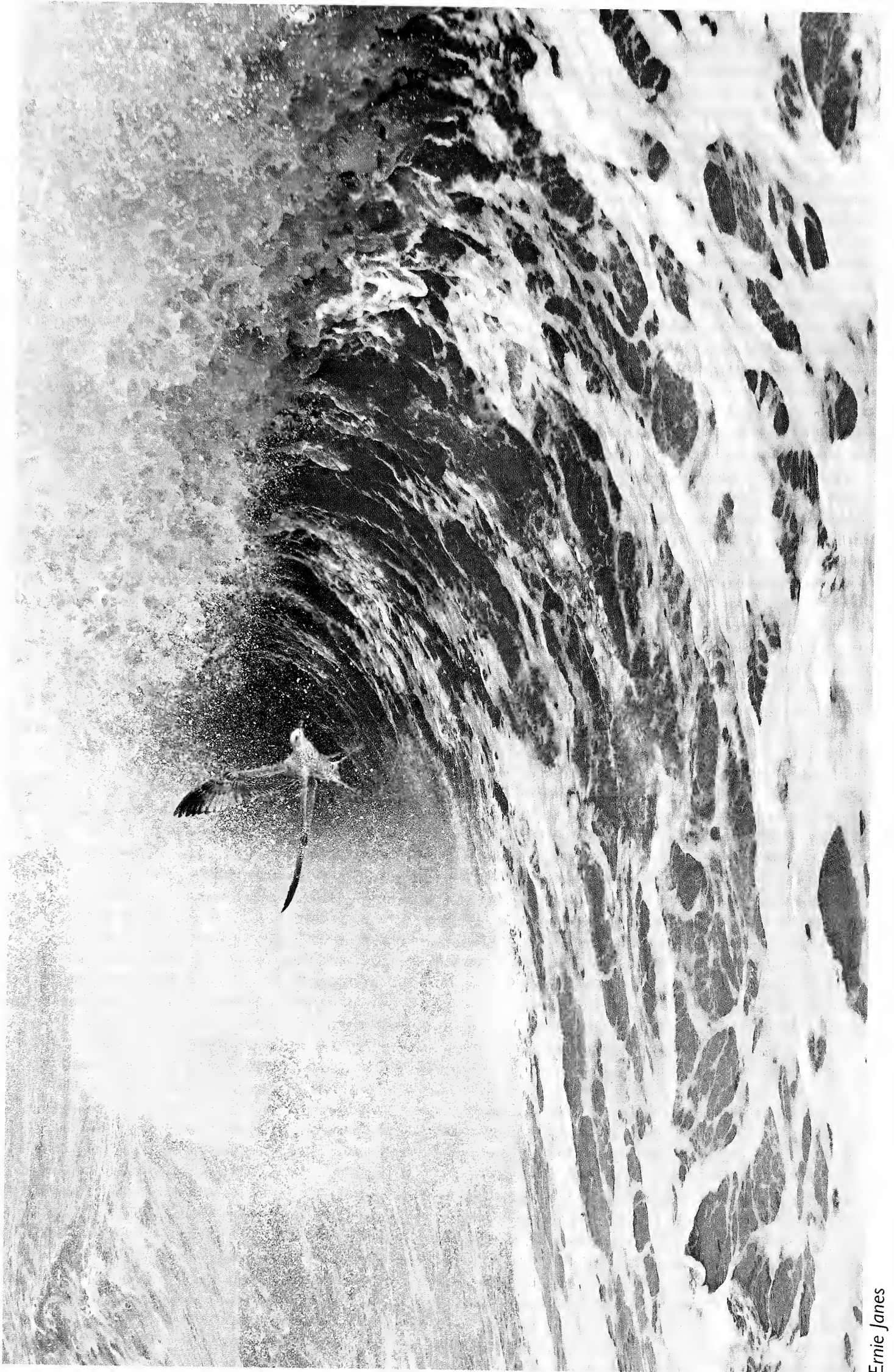
1st	Grey Heron <i>Ardea cinerea</i>	plate 222	Edmund Fellowes
2nd	Herring Gull <i>Larus argentatus</i>	plate 223	Ernie Janes
3rd	European Nightjar <i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>	plate 224	Jens Eriksen
4th	Capercaillie <i>Tetrao urogallus</i>	plate 225	Mike Lane
5th	Stone-curlew <i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>	plate 226	Bill Baston
6th	Black Grouse <i>Tetrao tetrix</i>	plate 227	Mike Lane
7th=	Lammergeier <i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>	plate 228	David Edge
7th=	Common Kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	plate 229	Steve Ward
9th	Marsh Harrier <i>Circus aeruginosus</i> and Avocets <i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	plate 230	Tony Howes
10th	Red-necked Phalarope <i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>	plate 231	Jens Eriksen
11th=	White-tailed Eagle <i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i> and Hooded Crow <i>Corvus cornix</i>	plate 232	Markus Varesvuo
11th=	Common Snipes <i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	plate 233	Oliver Smart
13th	Whiskered Terns <i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>		Ian Butler
14th	Red Knots <i>Calidris canutus</i>		Chris Gomersall
15th	Hoopoe Lark <i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>		Kit Day
16th	Blackbird <i>Turdus merula</i> and Fieldfare <i>T. pilaris</i>		Sandra Price
17th	Pintail <i>Anas acuta</i>		Suranjan Mukherjee
18th=	Grey Partridge <i>Perdix perdix</i> and Brown Hare <i>Lepus europaeus</i>		Chris Knights
18th=	Wren <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		Paul Rowe
20th	Great Grey Shrike <i>Lanius excubitor</i> and Blue Tit <i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		Mike Wilkes
Digiscoped entries			
1st	Red-backed Shrike <i>Lanius collurio</i>	plate 234	Paul Hackett
2nd	Eversmann’s Redstart <i>Phoenicurus erythronotus</i>	plate 235	Ian Boustead
3rd	Barn Swallow <i>Hirundo rustica</i>	plate 236	Justin Carr



Edmund Fellowes



**222. Bird Photograph of the Year 2014** Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*, Dumfries, Dumfries & Galloway, 22nd September 2013. (Canon EOS IDX, Canon 500 mm f4 IS + 1.4x converter; 1/5000, f8, ISO 2000.)



Ernie Jones

**223. Second** First-winter Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*, Mundesley, Norfolk, 5th February 2014.  
(Canon EOS Mk IV, Canon 70–200 mm f4 @ 70 mm; 1/4000, f7.1, ISO 640.)





Jens Eriksen

**224. Third European Nightjar** *Caprimulgus europaeus*, Muscat, Oman, 7th October 2013.  
(Canon EOS IDS Mk III, Canon 500 mm f4L IS; 1/4000, f4, ISO 400.)



In third place is Jens Eriksen's outstanding photograph of a European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* in flight over the sea in October 2013 off Muscat, in Oman. Apart from the fact that this Nightjar had been captured out of context, the judges particularly liked the backdrop of a well-lit sea. The sandy plumage tones suggest that this bird is one of the races of Nightjar that breed in the arid regions of central Asia, perhaps *C. e. unwini* or *C. e. plumipes*. This is a species that few birders get to see really well: typical encounters are of birds churring over heathland in the failing light and, less frequently, of birds roosting during the day, or sitting on a nest. But see a Nightjar in an unfamiliar setting, on migration over the sea, something that every bird which reaches these shores must do, and it becomes a very different and potentially confusing proposition – some nightjars observed during seawatches have even been mistaken for large, long-tailed petrels. In Oman, Nightjars are regular passage migrants and this female was photographed from a boat approximately 10 km offshore. It flew around the boat several times and landed briefly in front of the enthralled observers. For this exhausted migrant needing a place to rest, the boat was the first available option.

In fourth place comes Mike Lane's arresting image of a displaying male Capercaillie *Tetrao urogallus*. We have featured Capercaillies in this competition on several occasions – they are such impressive birds that it is difficult to resist them. So, for us to include another, it must be something quite special. Many birdwatchers have witnessed Capers at a lek, running back and forth, tails erect, wings drooped, and popping away like champagne corks going off. But how many will have seen a bird leap into the air in display and repeat this a dozen or more times? Photographed from a hide at a lek in Finland, this solitary bird put on a remarkable performance.

The Stone-curlew *Burhinus oedipnemos* is another species that has featured previously in the upper reaches of this competition. The photograph in fifth place by Bill Baston shows a calling Stone-curlew straining to increase the volume of its advertising call – the effort apparent from the feathering on

the nape and upper mantle, which is standing on end. The photograph was taken on the outskirts of Agadir, in Morocco, in March 2013, late in the day as birds became more active and began calling loudly to one another. By driving down a track alongside the fields and using his car as a hide, Bill was able to get close-up views of the birds in the early evening light without disturbing them.

In sixth place is another image of lekking grouse from Mike Lane, this time two Black Grouse *Tetrao tetrix*. This species is always a favourite with photographers and judges alike – it is a spectacular bird and, as here, is typically encountered in a spectacular setting, at dawn and in sub-zero temperatures. The image was also taken in Finland in April 2013 and Mike spent several hours in a hide overlooking a particular lek. He became quite familiar with this pair of males, which returned to fight at more or less the same spot each morning. The image is packed with action but frozen in time, and with the early morning sun illuminating the subtle iridescence on the birds' necks, it is difficult to imagine better composition and lighting.

In equal-seventh place is David Edge's image of an adult Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus* at the Escuin Gorge, in Spain's Aragon region. This is a well-known and popular location where Lammergeiers and Griffon Vultures *Gyps fulvus* gather to attend a feeding station within the gorge, and photographers gather to capture the spectacle. On 23rd September last year, during his fourth visit to the site in 2013, the birds were remaining distant, but David noticed that a Lammergeier was circling above a distant hillside and, with luck, could pass in front of the setting moon. With the added bonus of the rising sun illuminating the bird, this was too good an opportunity to miss and the result just goes to show that feather detail is not always needed for a great photograph.

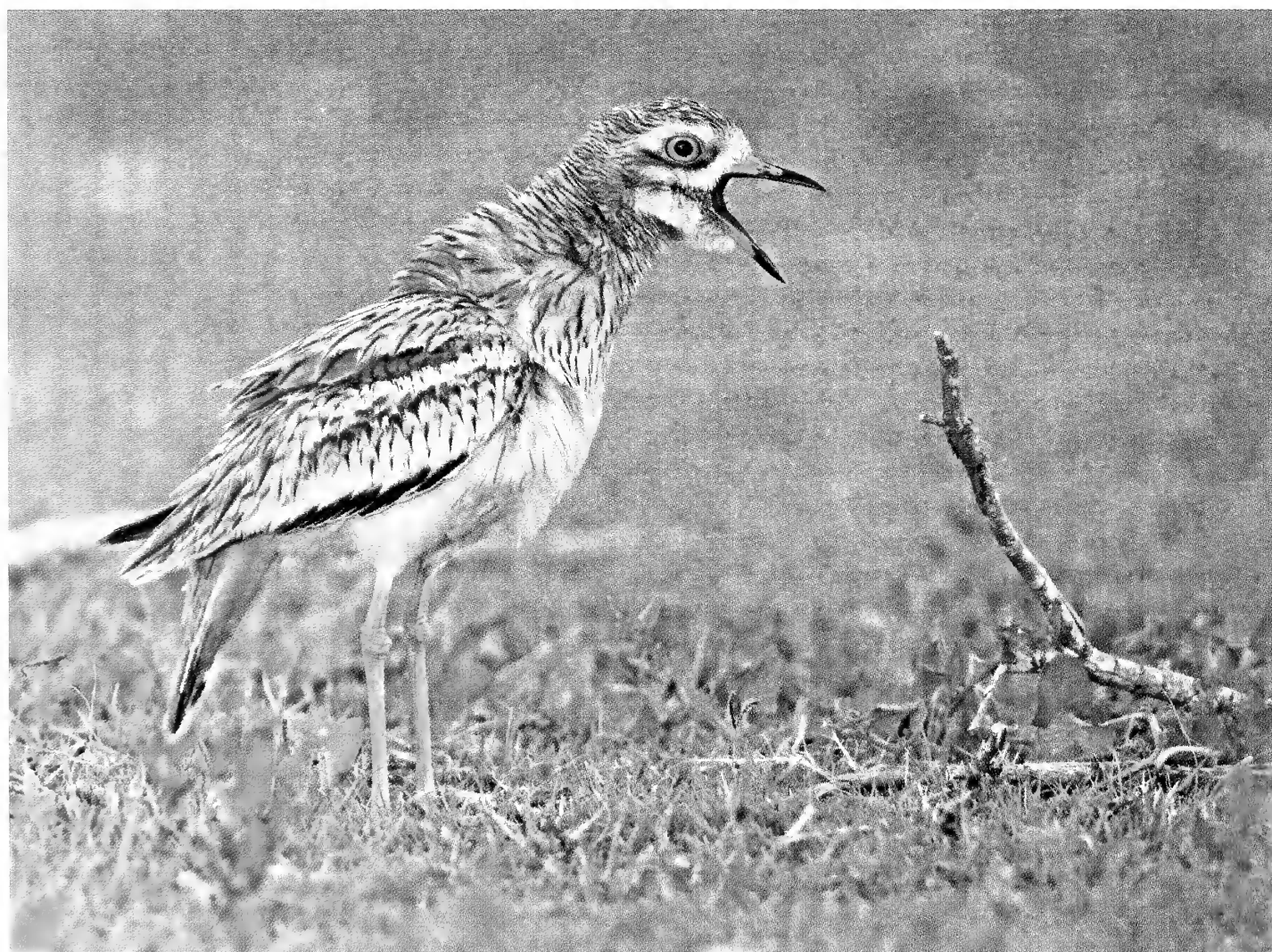
A hovering Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* is a quintessential part of the British landscape, and it's something we often take for granted. But if you are a small rodent and, looking up, your vision is filled by this avian equivalent of a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, it may well be the very last thing you ever see. Steve Ward captured this remarkable image on Altcar Moss near Southport, in Lancashire

Mike Lane



**225. Fourth** Capercaillie *Tetrao urogallus*, Finland, 25th April 2013. (Canon EOS 1DX, Canon 800 mm f5.6; 1/2500, f5.6, ISO 6400.)

Bill Baston



**226. Fifth** Stone-curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus*, Agadir, Morocco, 26th March 2013. (Canon EOS 1D Mk IV, Canon 500 mm f4 IS + 1.4x converter; 1/250, f6, ISO 800.)





Mike Lane

227. **Sixth** Black Grouse *Tetrao tetrix*, Finland, 21st April 2013. (Canon EOS IDX, Canon 800 mm f5.6; 1/2500, f5.6, ISO 1600.)

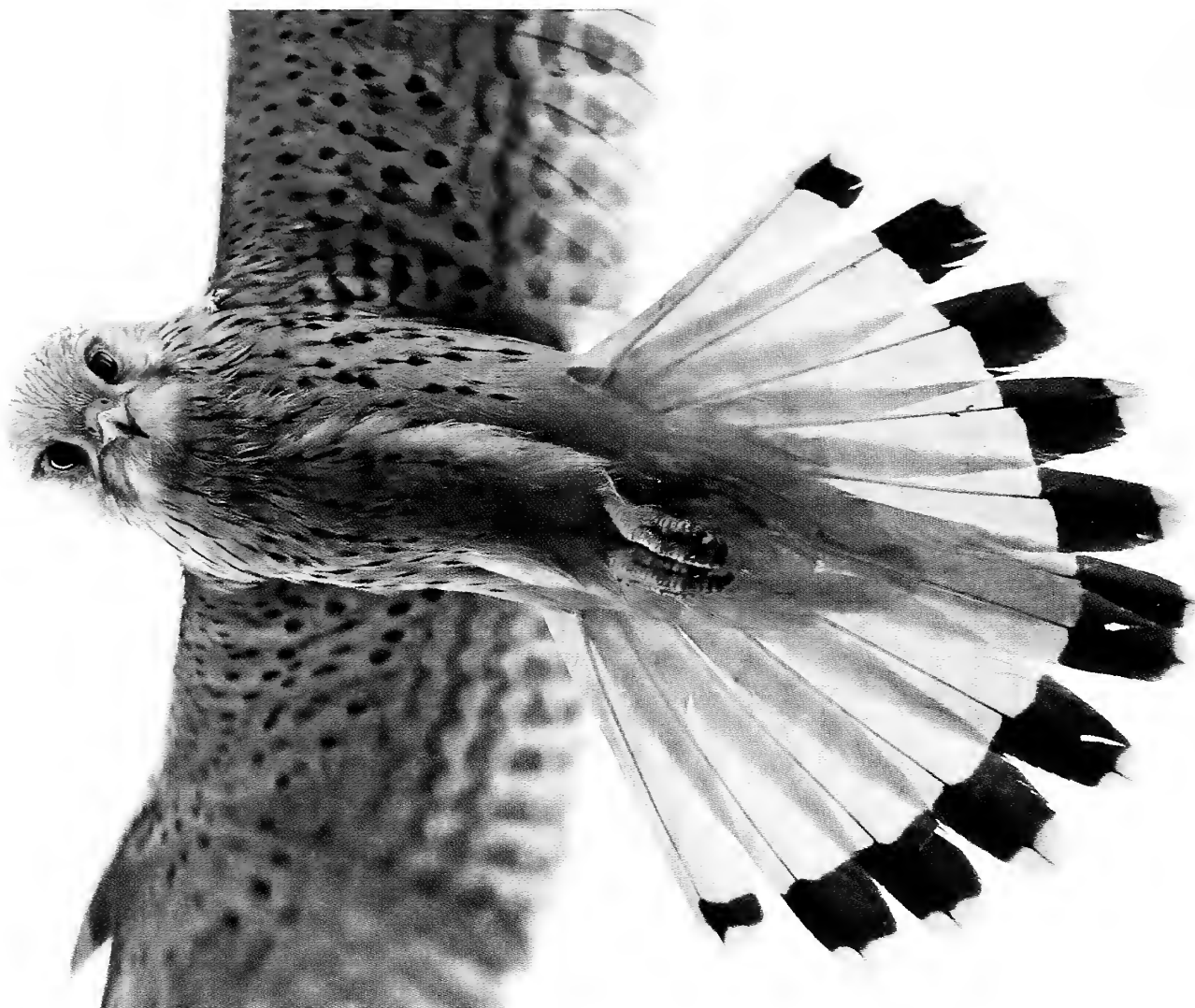


David Edge

228. **Seventh equal** Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*, Escuin Gorge, Aragon, Spain, 23rd September 2013. (Canon EOS 7D, Canon 800 mm f5.6; 1/2500, f/8, ISO 500.)



Steve Ward



**229. Seventh equal** Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, Altcar Moss, Lancashire and N Merseyside, 15th May 2013. (Canon EOS IDX, Canon 500 mm f4 IS + 1.4x converter; 1/400, f5.6, ISO 3200.)

Tony Howes



**230. Ninth** Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* and Avocets *Recurvirostra avosetta*, Cley, Norfolk, 26th June 2013. (Canon EOS 7D, Canon 300 mm f4 + 1.4x converter; 1/1250, f8, ISO 400.)

& North Merseyside, when he spotted a Kestrel hovering by the side of the road. He says: 'It was a case of hazard lights on, window down and shooting vertically using the only lens available – my 500-mm lens hand-held vertically upwards. Although the cars behind were honking their horns in frustration, the Kestrel ignored them and just kept coming lower and lower, to a point where I thought it was going to land on the lens.' Steve rates this as one of his finest encounters as a nature photographer. Despite the camera being hand-held, the poor light and car engine still running, it is a remarkable image and is equal seventh this year.

Tony Howes' image of a group of Avocets *Recurvirostra avosetta* pursuing a Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* is our ninth-placed photograph. Harriers attempt to rob the Avocet colony on a daily basis at Cley, Norfolk, and this harrier

raided it on several occasions during Tony's five-hour vigil in June 2013. Each time the raptor appeared, it was given a hard time by the parent Avocets but twice made it through the waders' air defences and made off with a chick. In this encounter, however, the Avocets appear to be the winners.

In tenth place comes Jens Eriksen's Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*, a common passage migrant and winter visitor to the Muscat region of Oman, where it occurs on the sea and at freshwater lakes. When sorting out his pictures from an off-shore boat trip, Jens was intrigued by this image of a phalarope in flight. It was not so much the bird itself, but rather the multiple



Jens Eriksen

**231. Tenth** Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*, Muscat, Oman, 7th October 2013. (Canon EOS IDS Mk III, Canon 500 mm f4L IS; 1/5000, f4, ISO 400.)

mirror images of the bird in the sea, an interesting physical phenomenon in itself. Though the sea was calm, the 'mirror' was not completely flat. The slightly slanting sea surface produced another mirror image and then another where the sea was at a slightly different angle, making a total of six reflected images.

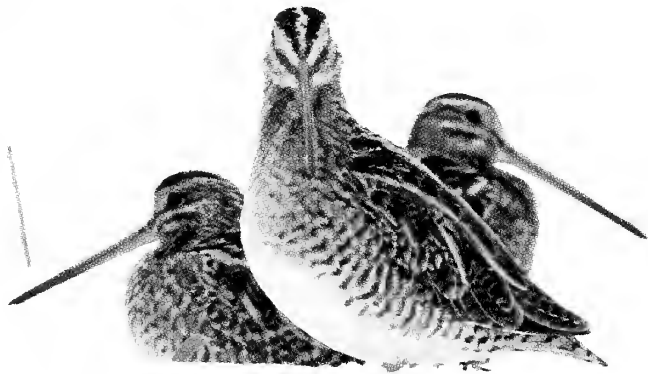
During the frigid months of the Finnish winter, when daylight hours are extremely short, birds are readily attracted to feeding stations, where a supply of easily accessible food enables them to survive the long, cold nights. Markus Varesvuo used a carcass to attract raptors and bring them within range of a strategically positioned hide. Among the

Markus Varesvuo



**232. Eleventh equal** White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* and Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*, Finland, 12th January 2014. (Canon EOS 1DX, Canon 200–400 mm f4; 1/1000, f5.6, ISO 2500.)

Oliver Smart



**233. Eleventh equal** Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, Swindon, Wiltshire, 22nd January 2013. (Canon EOS 1D Mk IV, Canon 500 mm f4L IS + 1.4x converter; 1/320, f8, ISO 400.)



comings and goings, the local Hooded Crows *Corvus cornix* attempted to dominate the scene, and even tried to drive away much larger species including White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*. One bird alone has little hope of dislodging this impressive eagle from its perch, but this image shows one having a good try. It brought a smile to the faces of the judges and was positioned eleventh equal.

In joint eleventh place comes Oliver Smart's striking image of a group of Common Snipes *Gallinago gallinago* photographed at a feeding station on a Wiltshire farm on a wintry day in January 2013. Oliver stayed inside his vehicle, using it as a hide and a beanbag as a tripod. Most of the images were of individual birds but eventually these three birds came closer together. Then it was simply a matter of waiting for a better composition, which produced this, the most interesting shot of the day, with each bird looking in a different direction.

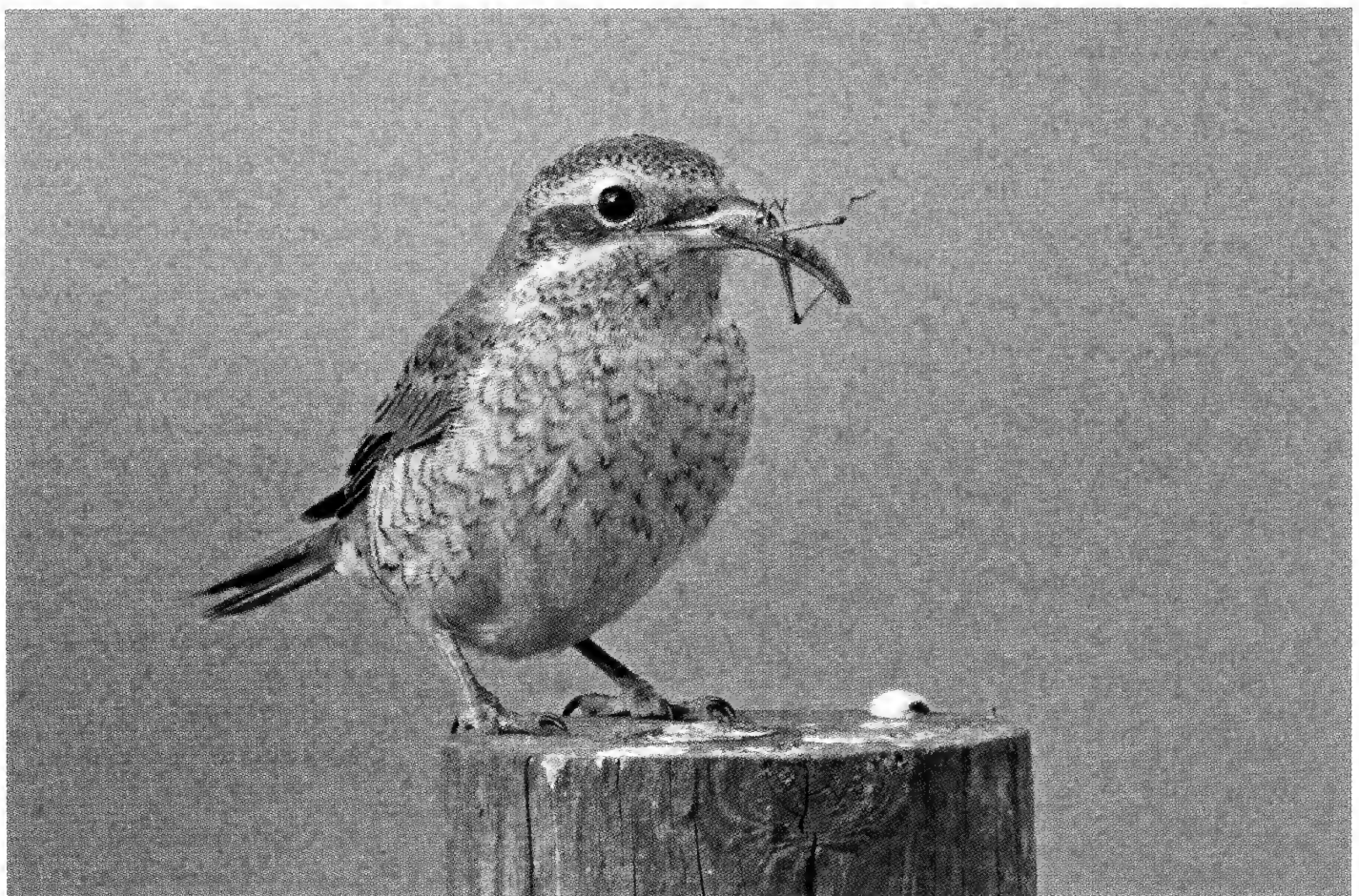
### The digiscoping section

Traditionally, digiscoping has been seen as a way for birders to record rare birds or interesting behaviour, taking advantage of the considerable pulling power of modern tele-

scopes. As cameras continue to improve, digiscoping has reached a level where the best images can compete alongside those taken with traditional equipment. The quality of many of this year's entries was of this standard and the winners would all have fitted comfortably into the main section. This seems a clear indication of where digiscoping is going, and we look forward to seeing continuing improvements in the coming years.

This year's **digiscoping winner**, a photograph of a juvenile Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* captured by Paul Hackett on Canvey Island in Essex in September 2013, encapsulates everything that this section of the competition aims to achieve: documenting action and behaviour that may be difficult to accomplish with conventional equipment, while at the same time producing a perfectly exposed image. Paul watched the bird for several minutes to determine its feeding strategy, then positioned himself further along the fence in the general direction that the bird was moving. Once he had selected a suitable location with a neutral background, he waited; and this image was taken at a distance of approximately 15 m.

Paul will be well known to many *BB*



Paul Hackett

**234. Digiscoping winner 2014** Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*, Canvey Island RSPB, Essex, 12th September 2013. (Sony RX100 Mk I, Kowa TSN 884 with 25–60 mm zoom eyepiece, Turbo Digisco adapter and cable release; 1/250, f5, ISO 200.)

Ian Boustead



**235. Second** Eversmann's Redstart *Phoenicurus erythronotus*, Jebel Hafeet, Al Ain, UAE, 7th February 2014. (Nikon 1 V1 with 18.5 mm lens, Swarovski ATX 95, electronic remote; 1/160, f2.8, ISO 100.)

Justin Carr



**236. Third** Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*, Spurn, Yorkshire, 14th July 2013. (Panasonic GH2 with 20 mm lens, Swarovski ATM 80 HD with 30x wide-angle eyepiece, Swarovski DCB adaptor and wireless remote; 1/1250, f1.7, ISO 1000.)

readers as one of Britain's leading exponents of digiscoping, and he can often be seen in action at digiscoping demonstrations throughout the country. He pioneered many of the techniques that today's digiscopers use and has been fortunate to test-drive much of the equipment that is now the standard kit most birders carry into the field. It is a fitting tribute to his drive and determination that he is the winner of the 2014 digiscoping competition.

The **runner-up** in this section is Ian Boustead's shot of a male Eversmann's Redstart *Phoenicurus erythronotus*, taken in the grounds of the Mercure Hotel on the summit of Jebel Hafeet in the UAE, where this species is a rare migrant and winter visitor. Photographing the bird proved quite a challenge; it frequented the putting green of a 'crazy golf' course which was overlooked by the hotel bedrooms, so early morning attempts at photography were out of the question. As well as being an unsuitable background, the whitewashed hotel walls reflected the sun later in the day, creating very harsh lighting conditions. The bird's favourite perches were the white flags that marked each of the holes on the course, but in this shot the bird is shown using a more photogenic setting and Ian secured a clean, crisp and nicely positioned image.

In **third place** is Justin Carr's capture of an adult Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* feeding a

recently fledged youngster at Spurn, Yorkshire, on 14th July 2013. The adults were returning regularly to fence posts near the Warren, where their hungry young were clamouring to be fed. This ensured that the adults revisited the same spot, but the fact that Justin was able to get the timing and exposure correct to freeze the moment illustrates just what it is possible to achieve with digiscoping.

## Prizes

The prizes for the winners will be presented at this year's British Birdwatching Fair on Friday 15th August. We would like to thank our sponsors, Anglian Water ([www.anglianwater.co.uk](http://www.anglianwater.co.uk)), Collins ([www.harpercollins.co.uk](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk)), Christopher Helm/Bloomsbury Publishing ([www.bloomsbury.com](http://www.bloomsbury.com)), Simon King Wildlife ([www.simonkingwildlife.com](http://www.simonkingwildlife.com)) and the Eric Hosking Charitable Trust ([www.erichoskingtrust.com](http://www.erichoskingtrust.com)) for their continued support – without which this competition would not continue. The rules and closing date for next year's competition will be announced in January 2015 on our website and in the journal.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to the BTO for hosting the judging event, and in particular to Dawn Balmer, who provided us with an irresistible selection of biscuits and an endless supply of tea and coffee.

Richard Chandler, Tim Appleton, Robin Chittenden, David Hosking, Peter Kennerley and David Tipling, c/o 4 Kings Road, Oundle, Peterborough PE8 4AX



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# Records of House Finch in Britain

Andrew Harrop, on behalf of BOURC

**Abstract** A male House Finch *Haemorhous mexicanus* at Land's End, Cornwall, in early May 2010, was subsequently seen at the Lizard (also Cornwall) and then East Prawle, Devon. The assessment of the record by BOURC covered a range of issues, including identification and taxonomy, migration and vagrancy, the status of the introduced population in eastern North America, and captive status in Europe. The balance of probability of the available evidence did not favour natural occurrence in a wild state and the record was placed in Category E.

A yellow male House Finch *Haemorhous mexicanus*, which turned up at Land's End, Cornwall, in early May 2010, generated much interest and discussion. The subsequent assessment of this record by BOURC covered a range of issues, including identification and taxonomy, migration and vagrancy, the status of the introduced population in eastern North America, and captive status in Europe, and these aspects are summarised in this article. Ultimately, the Committee's decision was that the balance of evidence did not favour natural occurrence in a wild state and the record was placed in Category E.

## The 2010 House Finch

The 2010 bird was present at Land's End, Cornwall, during 4th–12th May (Elliott 2010), then at the Lizard, Cornwall, on 16th May and finally at East Prawle, Devon, from 27th June to 22nd October. It was photographed at all three localities. BBRC did not receive a formal submission of the Land's End record, and the only submission supported by a description was that from the Lizard on 16th May.

The description published in Elliott (2010) of the bird at Land's End will not be repeated in detail here. The bird's song attracted attention ('like a slow, loud Willow Warbler [*Phylloscopus trochilus*] or a Chaffinch [*Fringilla coelebs*] lacking its terminal flourish'), and its features included a shallow notch at the tip of the tail and heavy smudgy dark streaks on the flanks, belly and

undertail-coverts. Its forehead, supercilia, chin, throat and breast were bright yellow.

Eleanor Reast described finding the bird at the Lizard: 'Walking past the Southerly House, I was struck by a totally unfamiliar call. A really rich, liquid descending call. I've been working in the area on the Chough Project since the end of March so I was used to the birds around me and was immediately struck by this being a non-native call. The bird sang a couple of times from thick tamarisk [*Tamarix*] but I got a very quick glance of it as it flew to the other side of the garden. I made my way around the other side of the tamarisk hedge to hear it sing once more above me. It then flew out of sight but, as I circled the garden again to get a better view, I caught it feeding on the bird feeder outside the house. However, it was positioned behind the feeders so more or less out of sight but I managed to glimpse the orange throat again. The bird flew completely out of sight and I didn't hear or see it again.'

The description of the bird at the Lizard was as follows. 'Finch-like in size and body shape, with a dark, stubby bill. The feature I noticed immediately was an orangey throat, almost akin to the rusty orange of a crossbill *Loxia*, although not as red. From the throat down to the breast this orange faded into a beige colour; the breast was marked with vertical streaking. Song as above, a loud, clear, rich liquid song and descending, similar to that of a Willow Warbler.'

Photographs of the bird at East Prawle

illustrate the changes in its appearance during its stay, which accord with the normal moult timing of wild birds. Yellow variants are more common in first-year birds, but are found in all age groups so coloration cannot be used as a reliable ageing criterion. In June (*Birding World* 23: 230) it was still yellow; by August it was becoming red (*Birding World* 230: 331); by September it had developed fully red plumage, but also showed symptoms of mycoplasmosis, often referred to as conjunctivitis ['eye disease'] (*Birding World* 230: 378), which is common in eastern North American populations of House Finch (e.g. Dhondt 1998). This condition was clearing up by 22nd October, the date on which it was last recorded (*Birding World* 230: 438). The timing of its disappearance was consistent with autumn movements in the eastern USA (see below).

Although there was no doubt about the bird's identity as a House Finch, it was important to establish the subspecific identification – since Mexican subspecies would not be considered credible candidates for transatlantic vagrancy. The subspecies *H. m. frontalis* (indigenous in western North America and which has been introduced in the east) typically has a wine-red forehead and supercilium, light russet-red plumage from the chin/throat to the mid-breast area (orange in a yellow morph), while the rest of the underparts are buff with quite broad brown streaks on the flanks. As shown by the photographs, the bird in Cornwall and Devon is a good match with *frontalis*. The Mexican races typically differ in the extent of red on the underparts (less in nominate *mexicanus*, more in most other races) and the extent and strength of streaking on the underparts (more in nominate *mexicanus*, less in most other races). Note that this is a simplified summary; for more details see del Hoyo *et al.* (2010).

### Identification, taxonomy, distribution and coloration

House Finch can be distinguished from Purple Finch *H. purpureus* and Cassin's Finch *H. cassinii* by a combination of indistinct eye-stripe and malar and streaked undertail-coverts (Pyle *et al.* 1987, which see for measurements). Compared with Common Rosefinch *Erythrura erythrina*, House Finch appears slightly larger and shorter-winged,



Andy Jordan



Andy Jordan

**237 & 238.** Male House Finch *Haemorhous mexicanus*, Land's End, Cornwall, May 2010.

has a shallower fork to the tail, heavier, broader streaks on the flanks and streaked undertail-coverts. The vocalisations of the two species also differ. If a potential vagrant is discovered, care should be taken to eliminate the possibility of captive taxa of House Finch and captive-bred variants of other finches (for example, Canary *Serinus canaria*).

The taxonomy of House Finch has received a variety of treatments during the last 140 years, but has not yet been tested against modern molecular techniques: Baird *et al.* (1874) recognised three subspecies; Ridgway (1901) recognised three species and seven subspecies; Moore (1939) recognised four species and 15 subspecies; AOU (1957) recognised 11 subspecies, while del Hoyo *et al.* (2010) recognised 11 extant subspecies and noted complex geographical variation, including variation in size and degree of sat-

uration of red in males. Del Hoyo *et al.* concluded that the present division of subspecies, based on male plumage and morphological features, 'may not be sustainable, and entire range of variation within the species requires further research.' Although it was formerly placed in the genus *Carpodacus*, Zuccon *et al.* (2012) placed it in *Haemorhous*, a treatment followed by BOU (BOU 2014).

In North America, the House Finch is indigenous in the west but was introduced in the east (New York) in about 1940 and spread so rapidly that by the 1990s its western and eastern ranges met. A separate introduced population also exists in Hawaii (Wootton 1987; del Hoyo *et al.* 2010). Del Hoyo *et al.* (2010) mapped the introduced range of this species, partly because the introduced range 'is now contiguous (or arguably overlapping) with the natural range'. Its distant Hawaiian range was not mapped, however. BOURC

took the view that a potential vagrant House Finch in Britain would most probably have originated from the introduced naturalised population in eastern North America, and should therefore be considered for admission to Category C5. As noted by Hill (2002), most House Finches in the USA do not migrate, though migratory behaviour seems to be developing in some introduced eastern populations (e.g. Able & Belthoff 1998, Belthoff & Gauthreaux 1991). Unlike most Nearctic passerine migrants, which have two moults a year (essentially post-breeding and pre-breeding), House Finches have a complete post-breeding moult and either no pre-breeding moult or a very limited one (Pyle 1987; Hill 2002). Belthoff & Gauthreaux (1991) found evidence for autumn movements during



Pat Mayer



Pat Mayer

239 & 240. Male House Finch *Haemorhous mexicanus*, East Prawle, Devon, October 2010.



October and very early November (following the post-breeding moult), and some evidence for northward return movements from wintering areas during March and early April among eastern populations.

Plumage colour in male House Finches is determined by complex factors. First-calendar-year males are, on average, duller than older males (Hill 2002), although there is overlap. The extent and brightness of red (as opposed to yellow or orange) in the plumage is determined by environmental rather than genetic factors, and in particular by dietary access to carotenoids. The situation is further complicated by the effect of parasites, including *Mycoplasma gallisepticum*, which if present tend to make the plumage drabber. Yellow or orange birds are found throughout the range of *H. m. frontalis* and, at least occasionally, in all subspecies of House Finch (Moore 1939) as well as among captive birds, so colour alone cannot be used to determine the geographical origin of individual birds. However, yellow House Finches are relatively common in captivity (pers. obs.) but much less so in most wild populations (e.g. Hill 2002).

### Other British records

Two records from Fair Isle in the 1960s were considered 'probable' by Pennington *et al.* (2004), who pointed out that neither bird was identified with certainty at the time (see also Dymond 1991, Proctor 2001). For the reasons explained below, some details of the first are inconsistent with an identification as House Finch. The extant details of the second are insufficient to prove the identification, and its condition suggested captive origin. The full details of these records, taken from the Fair Isle Bird Observatory logbooks, are as follows:

25th May 1962. Wind N–NE, force 7 to 5, bright intervals and occasional showers, overcast by late afternoon, cold.

The bird of the day was rather a problem – evidently a female of one of the species of Rosefinch (*Carpodacus* or allied genera). Barry [Barry Spence, the assistant warden; Peter Davis was the warden in 1962] found this at Taft and later mist-netted it at Busta. The

general build was like that of a Scarlet Grosbeak [Common Rosefinch], but larger and stouter; the bill heavier and the tail quite markedly forked. In colour it was predominantly ashy-brown above with a greenish-yellow tinge, a greenish-yellow rump, and golden-yellow fore-crown and forehead, rather asymmetrically marked. The chin, throat and upper breast were yellow centrally, washed greyish at sides; flanks washed ashy-grey and slightly streaked, centre of belly and undertail buffy white. Several species of Rosefinch (there are over a score all told) are kept in captivity, and as hardly any are migratory (other than the Scarlet Grosbeak) it is very likely that ours was an escape. We cannot identify it at the moment, having no descriptions of several Indian and Chinese forms. We released it unringed.

Note: This bird was later identified as a Mexican Housefinch (*C. mexicanus*), almost certainly an escape.

Ringling Log: 25th May. Wing 82, bill 14, tarsus 20, tail 60, weight 25.6, time 16.00. Wing formulae (distance in mm from wing-tip): 1st 11, 2nd 3, 3rd & 4th 0, 5th 4, 6th 9, 7th 12.5, 8th 15. 3rd and 4th emarginated, 5th slightly emarginated.

May 28th 1962. Wind mainly N to NE, moderate, increasing to fresh breeze. Overcast, heavy rain from about 10.00 hrs to 12.00 hrs. Intermittent showers later.

The ? Rosefinch was on the rocks near the South Light and singing! The song was uninspired, four notes, quite sweet and clear, the first two ascending and the second two falling again. The question is, do females sing or is it really a male?

The description of this bird does not fully support identification as House Finch. In particular, the 'markedly forked' tail and 'buffy white' undertail are inconsistent with House Finch, and the song as described does not sound typical of House Finch.

Details of the second bird are as follows:

April 27th 1966. A stormy day. SE 5–7. 8/8 → 0/8. Rain becoming hazy.

In the evening Nick [Nick Dymond, an assistant warden; Roy Dennis was the warden in 1966] did the traps; he caught a bird in the Obs which he thought was a female Scarlet Grosbeak. I only saw it in the hand in poor light, but it doesn't look right. It appears very slightly bigger and heavier than *Carpodacus erythrinus* [Common Rosefinch] and also rather browner. The eye also seems to be in a slightly different position nearer the bill. The wing and tail feathers are rather worn and suggest a cagebird. Also the feet are rather heavy and dirty like a cagebird's. Decided to keep it overnight and examine it in the morning in good light.

April 28th 1966. Wind S–SW, 4–5, 2/8–4/8 → 8/8. Some sun periods but some rain at noon and in the evening.

I got up early and photographed the Rosefinch spp. I think it's a cagebird, probably female *Carpodacus mexicanus* (Mexican Housefinch). A male was here several years ago. When released it flew out the window and called 'tsooeet' – rather Scarlet Grosbeak-like. It flew into the Obs trap and fed again on the corn there. I was able to approach within a few feet of it and it didn't fly away. Later, showed it to Jimmy Stout of Midway and Gordon, they both agreed it was an escaped cagebird. Ringed it with a red ring on right leg.

This bird was also present on 29th and 30th April. In the absence of a description it is impossible to verify this record. The current whereabouts of the photo is unknown, but Nick Dymond (*in litt.*) has confirmed that the wardens were '100% certain that it was an escaped cagebird'.

The only other published record of House Finch in Britain involved a presumed escape at Gazeley, Suffolk, in March 1988 (Piotrowski 2003). Two more presumed escapes were reported in 2014: a female at Tunbridge Wells, Kent, on 14th–15th March and a male at Kilnsea, Yorkshire, on 10th April. There have been no credible records in Ireland (K. Fahy *in litt.*).

## Transatlantic vagrancy

In May 2010, White-throated Sparrows *Zonotrichia albicollis* were recorded in Corn-

wall on 1st–2nd, Hampshire (Southampton) on 6th (one of five that had been on *Queen Mary II* when she left New York on 29th April; *Brit. Birds* 104: 621–622), Fair Isle on 19th–20th, Shetland on 21st, and Scilly on 26th; Dark-eyed Juncos *Junco hyemalis* were recorded in Kent on 15th–17th and in the North Sea on 19th; and a Brown-headed Cowbird *Molothrus ater* was in France, south-east of Paris on 4th May. In these circumstances, the House Finch at Land's End required serious consideration as another transatlantic arrival.

The issues around 'transatlantic vagrancy' by birds have been debated without unanimous resolution for well over 50 years. Alexander & Fitter (1955) stated: 'Most authors of comprehensive works on British birds, down to *The Handbook* (Witherby *et al.* 1938–41), have held that small landbirds could not possibly cross the Atlantic unaided'. They argued against this view, using a combination of arguments that followed Williamson (1954) in emphasising the importance of a rapid transatlantic crossing in a strong westerly airstream, and a statistical analysis of the 103 records of North American landbirds in western Europe (up to and including 1953, which showed a distinct peak in autumn and a less distinct peak in spring). In a critical analysis of records of American passerines between 1951 and 1962, Nisbet (1963) discussed other important factors including reversed migration and ship-assisted passage, and argued that most Nearctic thrushes, vireos, warblers and some other species were unlikely to have arrived as a result of assisted passage. He compared 'old' records of Nearctic passerines in Europe with those from 'recent years', and concluded: 'most of the records of American blackbirds and other short-distance migrants in Europe were of escaped cagebirds, but... most of the records of warblers, thrushes and other long-distance migrants have been genuine records of wild birds which had flown across the Atlantic.'

BOURC has revisited the issue of transatlantic vagrancy several times, and in 2005 revised its published guidelines as follows: 'Ship assistance is not necessarily a bar to inclusion on the British List, provided the bird was not confined, sheltered or

provisioned during its journey. If the bird is found dead on board, we need to consider whether it may have died in British waters. Finally, we need to consider if the species might be capable of reaching Britain without ship “assistance” (BOU 2005).’ BOURC’s policy on ship assistance was never meant to allow non-migratory species or port-to-port transportees to be admitted to the British List. The Committee recently amended the wording of its policy on ship assistance to reflect better the Committee’s views, as follows: ‘That the species might be expected to arrive in Britain naturally and without ship assistance given favourable circumstances (i.e. the species is migratory and its migratory route matches that of other species believed to occur naturally).’

More recent discussions (e.g. Jiguet 2010) have leant towards the BOURC position while recognising the complexity of assessing the origin of many potential transatlantic vagrants. During circulation of the House Finch file, BOURC looked again at its guidelines. After lengthy deliberations, which included consideration of several migration and dispersal concepts (e.g. Dingle & Drake 2007), it concluded that they should stand. It is recognised that there may sometimes be a tension between what individual birds appear to do and the formal requirements of national lists.

### Status in captivity and other European records

House Finches are common in captivity and were first bred in the UK in 1956 (*Cage & Aviary Birds* 6th May 2010). At that time, imported birds may well have been *H. m. frontalis* from the USA, but since the trade restrictions brought in during the early 1990s there will have been few legal imports of this subspecies, though presumably importation from northwest Mexico is possible. Most of those currently imported come from farther south in Mexico. Although common and inexpensive (£30 for a good specimen), only a small proportion of these captive birds retain the appearance of *frontalis*. For example, of 14 birds on display at Newark Show on 7th November 2010, just one appeared to be *frontalis*; the rest resembled Mexican taxa (see above) or exhibited

various shades of pastel, cinnamon, brown, yellow and red developed through selective or cross breeding and diet.

Ebels (1996) listed three records from the Netherlands: two in 1975, on 1st October and from 12th November until 5th January 1976; and one in 1979, from 24th January until the end of February. A subsequent Dutch record, which involved an escaped female House Finch paired with a male Common Rosefinch, in June 2012 was recorded in *Dutch Birding* 34: 265 and 270. Recent records from France are described at [www.birdingtheedge.blogspot.co.uk/2012/01/house-finch-near-paris.html](http://www.birdingtheedge.blogspot.co.uk/2012/01/house-finch-near-paris.html) and <http://birdingtheedge.blogspot.co.uk/2013/02/a-new-house-finch-near-paris.html>.

These records confirm the need for caution when assessing records of potential vagrant House Finches in Europe.

### Summary and conclusion

Several factors supported the view that the House Finch in Cornwall and Devon during May–October 2010 might have been a ship-assisted vagrant. It was found at a location consistent with a transatlantic crossing, just after the discovery of a White-throated Sparrow (also in Cornwall, on 1st–2nd May). It showed characters of the subspecies *H. m. frontalis*, which is the subspecies most likely to arrive as a vagrant and relatively uncommon in trade. However, when it arrived it was yellow, which is a relatively common variation in captive birds but much less frequent in the wild. The bird’s long stay (over six months) is not typical of Nearctic passerine vagrants in Britain, though it has been significantly exceeded by that of an accepted White-throated Sparrow which remained for more than two years in Hampshire (*Brit. Birds* 105: 616) and an extended stay would not necessarily be surprising in a vagrant House Finch. Perhaps most importantly, there were concerns that a vagrant House Finch would be unlikely to have arrived without ship assistance.

After a protracted circulation, during which its guidelines on the assessment of transatlantic vagrants were re-examined, BOU (2014) concluded that ‘a decision on the provenance of an individual bird is a call on balance of probability, and for admission



to the list the balance of probability must be judged to be overwhelmingly in favour of natural occurrence in a wild state. In this case, BOURC did not have sufficient confidence that this was the case.'

## Acknowledgments

Members of BOURC discussed transatlantic vagrancy and the House Finch file. Martin Collinson and Chris McInerney commented on a draft of this paper and suggested several improvements. Frederic Jiguet contributed to the discussion and posted details of the Paris birds on his blog. David Parnaby and Steffan Walton at Fair Isle Bird Observatory helped with the Fair Isle records, and Nick Dymond commented on the 1966 record. Kieran Fahy kindly answered a query about the status of House Finch in Ireland.

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# Saving the Spoon-billed Sandpiper: an update on the conservation programme

Nigel Clark, Debbie Pain and Rhys Green

**Abstract** The world population of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Calidris pygmeus* was in freefall during the first decade of the present century. In recent years there has been a prodigious effort to turn around the species' fortunes and there are now some glimmers of hope for the future. Conserving a species that migrates a quarter of the way round the world requires actions of many different kinds, undertaken in many countries by a wide range of people and organisations working in partnership. Here we summarise some of the ongoing work and describe the first tentative results of one of the most challenging conservation projects ever undertaken.

## Finding Spoon-billed Sandpipers

In 2011 it was estimated that the world population of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Calidris pygmeus* numbered fewer than 100 adult breeding pairs, and that between 2002 and 2009 numbers had declined by about 26% per year (Zöckler *et al.* 2010). The time left to act was critically short: a continuation of that trend would have meant that only about 50 breeding pairs remained by 2013 with a mere handful at Meinypil'gyno, on the Chukotka coast in Arctic Russia, the most important known breeding site (fig. 1). In fact, numbers at Meinypil'gyno have held up better than we feared, with 10–11 pairs in 2013 (Tomkovich 2013). Ideally, breeding or potential breeding areas would be monitored every year, but access to any of these sites in northeast Russia requires a major expedition, involving months of planning and considerable resources. By the same token, this very remoteness gives Spoon-billed Sandpipers some protection from egg- and skin-collectors (and, shamefully, there is still a market for newly collected specimens).

The search for as yet undiscovered breeding sites has been greatly assisted by

Heritage Expeditions which, in every year from 2011 to 2013, has taken its ship to places that it would otherwise be impossible to reach. One new site with a few pairs of birds was found in 2011 (IUCN News 2011), but the failure to find more, both at previously occupied sites and in places where satellite images predict that suitable breeding habitat exists, reinforces the suggestion that the population is very small and that the breeding range may have contracted.

Stopover sites are critical for waders that need to refuel on a long migration, and the tiny Spoon-billed Sandpiper has a daunting 8,000-km journey to reach its wintering grounds. The intertidal area of Saemangeum, in South Korea, was a key stopover site for Spoon-billed Sandpipers until it was destroyed by the construction of a 33-km seawall in 2006 (Pain *et al.* 2011). Several hundred birds were reported to use Saemangeum's mudflats but few birds have been recorded since the seawall was completed (and very few appear to have moved to nearby estuaries). Many people have searched other parts of the Yellow Sea to try to find other key stopover sites, resulting in the

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241. A Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Calidris pygmeus* on the wintering grounds in Bangladesh, January 2014.

discovery of Spoon-billed Sandpipers staging at Rudong (north of Shanghai, in Jiangsu province) in 2010 by Zhang Lin. Zhang Lin, Jing Li and Tong Menxiu founded the group ‘SBS in China’ and began counting waders at Rudong on a regular basis (Menxiu *et al.* 2012). In October 2013 this culminated in over 140 moulting adult Spoon-billed Sand-

pipers being found on a 120-km stretch of coastline, surveyed with help from an international team.

While small numbers of Spoon-billed Sandpipers are still found in South Korea, and odd birds occur elsewhere in the Yellow Sea, Rudong must be considered as the most important stopover site in autumn and probably spring as

well (Li 2012; Menxiu *et al.* 2012). Combining what is known about the timing of adults leaving the breeding grounds and arriving at Rudong with flight-length modelling suggests that Rudong is too far from the breeding grounds for Spoon-billed Sandpipers to reach it in autumn in a single flight, so the search is on for another stopover farther north in the Russian Far East. Until it is found, we cannot know about

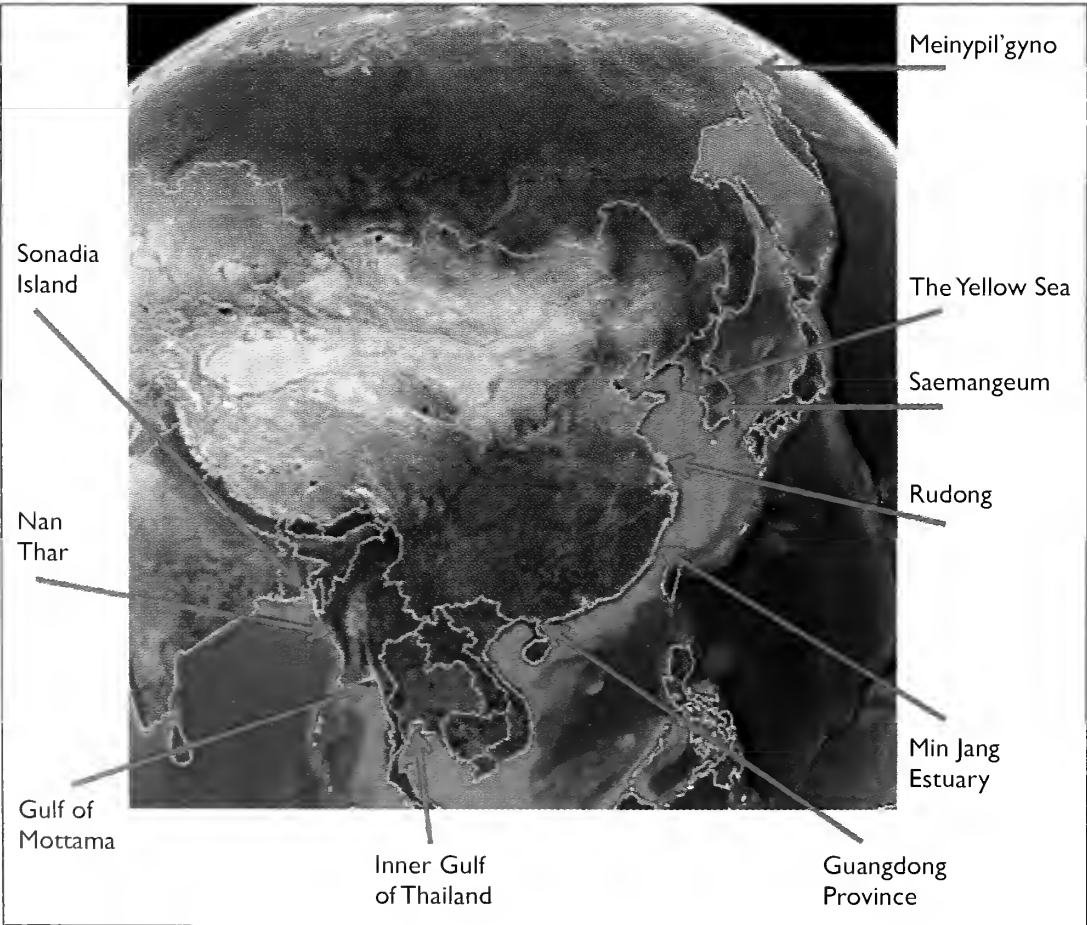


Fig. 1. Sites named in the text.



potential threats to the birds there. Improved knowledge about every link in the chain is vital for this species to survive.

The most important wintering sites for Spoon-billed Sandpipers are the Gulf of Mottoma (Martaban) and Nan Thar, in Myanmar, and Sonadia Island, in Bangladesh. These are believed to hold over half of the wintering population. In the past two winters it has become clearer that there are small numbers of Spoon-billed Sandpipers wintering over a vast area of coastline, from the Min Jiang Estuary in Fujian, southeast China, to Bangladesh – and possibly even in India, despite the lack of recent records there. In each of the countries within the wintering range, local conservation groups have been active in searching for wintering sites. These groups are often helped by members of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force from other countries, making the search a truly international enterprise. This has led to the discovery of new wintering sites in China, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and Bangladesh, yet none of these hold double-figure numbers of Spoon-billed Sandpipers. In many ways this is encouraging, because it means that there is no single irreplaceable site, but it does increase the number of places where conservation action is needed.

The continuing risk of Spoon-billed Sandpipers being targeted by collectors has meant that some breeding and wintering sites are kept confidential to minimise the risk to the species. Finding new breeding, wintering and staging sites would be greatly helped if it was possible to attach some form of position-recording devices to Spoon-billed Sandpipers. Technological progress means that this may not be far away but we cannot risk an untested device on a Critically Endangered species until studies on other, similar, species have shown that they do not affect survival prospects.

## Raising awareness and promoting education

The inspirational power of this quirky little wader was nicely illustrated in 2012, when BirdLife International's 'Saving Spoony's Chinese Wetlands' project was shortlisted by the Disney Foundation as one of five

programmes that children could vote for. Spoony fended off strong competition to win, in the process securing a welcome \$100,000 for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper project. Several other initiatives to raise awareness have also proved extremely successful. On the Russian breeding grounds in Meinypil'gyno, the village schoolchildren have been taught about their Spoon-billed Sandpipers and have sent letters to their counterparts in other countries along the flyway asking them to look after their birds. This was taken further by Vivian Fu of the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society (HKBWS), who produced an animated video of the trials of a Spoony's life, which led to the involvement of schoolchildren in countries along the migration route. This charming video carries an important conservation message, which the decision makers of tomorrow are learning in their formative years (see [www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=DJq4eaoeWlg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=DJq4eaoeWlg)).

Getting the message across is important for the future, but Spoon-billed Sandpipers need attitudes to change *now*; otherwise they will be extinct before tomorrow's decision makers are in a position to blame us for our lack of action. Changing attitudes and perceptions is difficult but not impossible and raising awareness in the Bay of Martaban has involved a wide range of activities, including discussions with the village elders and giving out T-shirts with a picture and a simple 'Protect the Spoon-billed Sandpiper' message in the local language. Posters are displayed in all the villages and anywhere you go the local people know that the foreign visitors are here to help the birds. Such actions are proving very effective but this outside engagement must be maintained in the long term if it is to be truly successful. If outsiders lose interest in the sandpipers, the danger is that the same will happen among local people.

In Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Spoon-billed Sandpiper Conservation Project launched a year-long awareness campaign on Sonadia Island, a wintering stronghold for the species. The events included a shorebird photo exhibition, film shows on Spoon-billed Sandpiper conservation work in Bangladesh and Russia, folk songs and drama involving bird conservation and highlighting the plight

of Spoon-billed Sandpipers. In addition, former hunters visited schools to explain the conservation work that they were now doing.

### **Habitat loss: the critical long-term issue**

Habitat loss is a major issue for all waders that depend on intertidal areas in Asia outside the breeding season. Across the globe coastal sand flats and mudflats are being claimed to provide land for development but nowhere is the issue more critical than in the Yellow Sea. Across the six key Yellow Sea coastal sites used by waterbirds, an average of 35% of intertidal habitat has been lost since the early 1980s (MacKinnon *et al.* 2012). For example, the Rudong mudflats on the Jiangsu coastline are being lost at an alarming rate. Most of the Spoon-billed Sandpipers there have to roost on recently claimed land since there is no upper marsh left at high tide. Modern methods of seawall construction (using geotextile tubes pumped full of sediment-laden water) have reduced building time from years to weeks. An increasing number of people in China are aware of such environmental issues and realise that if current rates of land claim in the Yellow Sea continue, the consequences will be disastrous – not just ecologically but for local people too. For example, traditional harvesting of shellfish from intertidal flats, important both culturally and economically, is quickly lost; protection of intertidal areas for shellfishing would lead to increased awareness of their value for food security as well as for wildlife. The efforts of ‘SBS in China’ have led to a protected area that has been designated by the local government just for Spoon-billed Sandpipers. It covers 10,000 ha of critical mudflats and is complemented by protected areas for shellfish, something that will help to maintain the livelihoods of local people while simultaneously protecting bird feeding areas.

The Yellow Sea is not the only place where reclamation proposals threaten Spoon-billed Sandpipers. In Thailand, a massive land-claim project has been proposed that would enable a new city to be built on land claimed in the Inner Gulf of Thailand, from mangroves and mudflats around the provinces of Bangkok, Samut Prakan and Samut Sakhon.

In Bangladesh, while the threat from bird-trapping has been reduced at the key Spoon-billed Sandpiper wintering area at Sonadia Island, the site is still threatened by advanced proposals to build a deep-sea port ([www.conservationindia.org/case-studies/saving-the-spoon-billed-sandpiper-in-bangladesh](http://www.conservationindia.org/case-studies/saving-the-spoon-billed-sandpiper-in-bangladesh)). This development would remove a core wintering area while the changes in water flows from the extensive channel dredging that would be required are likely to make any remaining habitat unsuitable for Spoon-billed Sandpipers. Long-term security for Spoon-billed Sandpiper habitats is only likely to come from an increased understanding of the value of intact and extensive intertidal areas as part of a healthy ecosystem.

Despite these many threats, there *has* been real progress, with the recognition and designation of some key sites of critical importance for the species. For example, on 2nd February 2014 the Myanmar Minister for Environmental Conservation and Forestry celebrated World Wetlands Day by asserting his government’s intention to propose three Ramsar sites to be protected under the Convention, including the key site of Mottama Bay, Martaban (Myanmar Freedom Daily 2014). Resolution 28 at the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) World Congress in South Korea in September 2012 was passed to help conserve key intertidal wetlands along the East Asian–Australasian Flyway. Several countries along the flyway are now considering what actions need to be taken to deliver their commitments under this Resolution, and the conservation and academic communities are gathering information that may help, for example on the ecosystem services provided by intact intertidal wetlands.

### **Hunting: the critical short-term issue**

The increased survey effort in all parts of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper’s range has repeatedly identified hunting as the most apparent and immediate threat to the continued survival of the species in the short term. The reasons for hunting vary regionally and nationally, so local factors must be taken into account to tackle the problem successfully. At

Rudong, fine nets are often strung up on poles, ostensibly to catch fish. Often however, they are put above the high-tide point where fish never venture and are clearly intended to catch birds. Nets recently set in this way, in the newly created Spoon-billed Sandpiper reserve, were rapidly confiscated by the authorities once they were made aware of the situation. Such action will help to deter others, but nets are cheap and the perpetrators will probably be back. And nets are not the only way waders are hunted. Small dried shrimps are often laced with poison and spread around wader roost sites and feeding hotspots. The hunters collect the poisoned birds and sell them as a delicacy, but the baits continue to kill birds long after the hunters have left (NC pers. obs.). The hunting of protected bird species is illegal under provincial law, but appears to be widespread and enforcement is rarely prioritised by the appropriate authorities. Greater awareness and capacity is needed.

Further south in China, in Guangdong province, Jonathan Martinez and colleagues from the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society have found Spoon-billed Sandpipers on passage and wintering in areas where bird hunting occurs at an alarming intensity (SBSTF 2013). In winter 2013, Jonathan and his team found over 2,500 mist-nets set to catch wild birds along the 500 km of coast-line surveyed (J. Martinez pers. comm.). The catch is reportedly taken to markets in nearby cities and sold as a 'luxury food'. The local forest department has acted quickly to ensure that the nets were removed, but the coastline is long, detection is difficult and risks remain. Increased local conservation effort is needed to identify areas where waders are at risk and to support the local authorities. Where such illegal bird-trapping and trade occurs, the shop owners and middle men need to be prosecuted, as well as the hunters.

Finding ways to stop hunting is not easy, but the success of local conservation groups in tailoring their approach for local circumstances is producing some encouraging results. In Nan Thar (Myanmar), wader hunting helped to supplement the income of the local villagers, so the local conservation group, together with task force members,

developed alternative income opportunities from wader-ecotourism. The tourists brought much-needed income and the conservation group arranged for extra infrastructure for the village. Although small scale, this was sufficient to ensure that the villagers were incentivised to look after their birds. In Bangladesh, the conservation group raised funds to provide loans to hunters to enable them to establish alternative businesses – for example, to rent land and begin farming watermelons. Once they had a crop, the loan would be repaid gradually to the local co-operative and the money used for community projects. Resources were also provided to enable people to take up fishing and livestock farming, and to start up grocery and clothing shops (Chowdhury 2010). In the Bay of Martaban, agreements were reached with the village leaders that they would not allow anyone to hunt if the hunters in the village were able to swap their bird-catching nets for the means to make a new livelihood. This was often a fishing boat or small shop. The most successful ex-hunter asked for a cool box and became a fish trader; the cool box enabled him to buy fish from the village fishermen and get it fresh to market in the neighbouring town where he could get a better price.

## Helping the population to recover

In 2011 the conservation community decided that the Spoon-billed Sandpiper's situation was so desperate that a conservation breeding population was necessary – providing a safety net to reduce the risk of extinction if measures to protect birds in the wild did not work sufficiently quickly (Pain *et al.* 2011). This was an incredibly difficult proposition, since the last-known breeding site with more than ten pairs was in a remote part of Chukotka. A team from the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT), led by Nigel Jarrett, with colleagues from Birds Russia and Moscow Zoo and support from RSPB, were tasked with the monumental challenge of collecting 20 eggs from the breeding site at Meinypil'gyno, then hatching and rearing birds on the Arctic tundra. Despite myriad logistical hurdles, this was remarkably successful, with 14 young birds brought back to purpose-built wintering aviaries at Slimbridge in November



2011 after several months in quarantine. To supplement these birds, a second expedition was undertaken in 2012. This time, the team planned to bring eggs direct from Meinypil'gyno to the UK, thus avoiding the stress and risks posed by rearing, quarantine and transport of young birds in temporary transit facilities. Initially, it was felt that the logistics would defeat the attempt, since it required a chartered helicopter to fly eggs from Meinypil'gyno to Anadyr (the capital of

Chukotka) on a particular day. Fog can ground aircraft for weeks, but sufficient eggs have to be found at a similar stage of incubation by a date on which flying is safe. The eggs would then need to be flown from Anadyr to Moscow, and then from Moscow to the UK, and to Slimbridge, before hatching. In fact, and with some strategic help from British Airways pilot Jerry Woodham, the eggs arrived at Slimbridge just a few hours before the first one hatched. At the time of writing, in May 2014, there are 25 birds at Slimbridge and, with breeding aviaries recently constructed, everyone is hopeful of breeding this summer or in 2015.

Nigel Jarrett also came up with the idea of 'headstarting'. The heaviest losses during breeding of wild pairs are due to predation of eggs or very young chicks and this results in wild pairs producing on average only 0.6 fledglings per year from a clutch of 3–4 eggs. After the success of taking and hatching eggs for conservation breeding in 2011, Nigel realised that his team could potentially do about five times better than that. Why not then give the birds a helping hand by artificially rearing young on the tundra and then releasing the juveniles to increase the population? Furthermore, if the eggs were taken sufficiently early, the adults might lay a replacement clutch, increasing the value of headstarting still further. Since, by 2012, there

were signs that the reduction of trapping on the non-breeding grounds was proving successful, it was also felt likely that more immatures should survive to breeding age. Headstarting therefore had the potential to make a real difference to the wild population.

Headstarting was trialled in 2012, when nine Spoon-billed Sandpipers were released on the tundra as newly fledged juveniles.



Baz Hughes/WWT



Baz Hughes/WWT

**242 & 243.** Spoon-billed Sandpipers *Calidris pygmeus* in the biosecure facility at WWT Slimbridge, in late May 2014, in their 'tundra' aviary.

Buoyed by this success, the team reared and released a further 18 in 2013, of which no fewer than 16 appeared to migrate successfully. And, since clutches were taken at a very early stage, at least four pairs relaid. Headstarting has thus had a dramatic effect in increasing the number of young being reared at Meinypil'gyno (fig. 2). These head-started birds were fitted with leg flags for individual identification. We still know little about where juvenile Spoon-billed Sandpipers go in their first autumn but, despite the low chance of observing them along their 8,000-km migration route, in early November 2013 one was seen in Thailand and then a few days later a second was found on the coast in southern China. Even more remarkable was the observation, by Chung-Yu Chiang and Chin-Shi Hsu, of 'Lime 8' in Taiwan on 7th April 2014. Lime 8 was one of the nine headstarted birds from 2011, on its way north to breed for the first time. Pictures of Lime 8 showed that its first breeding-plumage upperpart feathers were emerging and were at the same stage as those of the captive birds hatched from eggs collected in 2011. And then, a few weeks later, Lime 8 was identified as a female at Meinypil'gyno, mated with an unringed male. She subsequently laid a clutch of eggs and will perhaps become the first headstarted bird



Baz Hughes/WWT

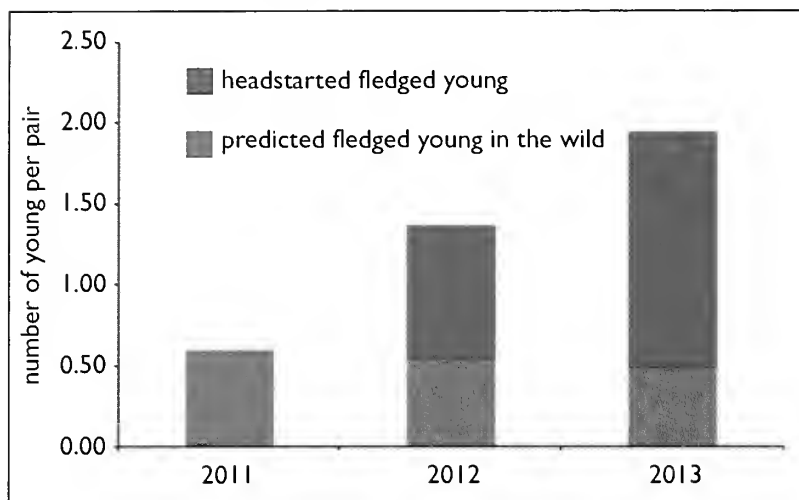


Baz Hughes/WWT

**244 & 245.** Spoon-billed Sandpipers *Calidris pygmeus* in the biosecure facility at WWT Slimbridge, in late May 2014, in their 'tundra' aviary.

known to breed successfully in the wild.

One pair – the 'Monument' pair – has contributed a disproportionate amount to the wild population in 2013. Their first clutch was taken in 2013 for headstarting; three young were reared successfully and migrated, one of which was the bird observed in Thailand. The pair then laid a replacement clutch, from which three young fledged in the wild, one of those subsequently being observed in Myanmar. Monument male himself was seen at Rudong in August 2013 and his mate was seen in Thailand during the following winter. In addition, two of Monument male's older offspring are in the conser-



**Fig. 2.** The effect of headstarting on the expected number of young fledged per pair of Spoon-billed Sandpipers *Calidris pygmeus* from the core monitoring area at Meinypil'gyno. Note: 20 eggs were also taken in 2011 and 2012 for captive breeding, but the expected number of young fledged in the wild assumes that productivity in the core area was not affected by the removal of these eggs.

vation breeding flock at WWT Slimbridge!

By increasing the number of young produced and thus reducing the risk of the species' extinction at such a critical time, headstarting has been a tremendously important innovation. Yet the success of headstarting, and in future the release of captive-bred Spoon-billed Sandpipers, depends on the effectiveness of *all* the conservation work on this species, throughout its range. A great start has been made to reduce losses through hunting and the apparent slowing of the rate of decline is encouraging, but we cannot let up in our efforts. One of the biggest challenges ahead is undoubtedly to ensure that there are safe stopover sites in the Yellow Sea. And until we find the missing stopover site(s) in Russia, we do not know if conservation action is needed there. Only by working together is there any hope of turning around the fortunes of this charismatic

species. We still have plenty to do.

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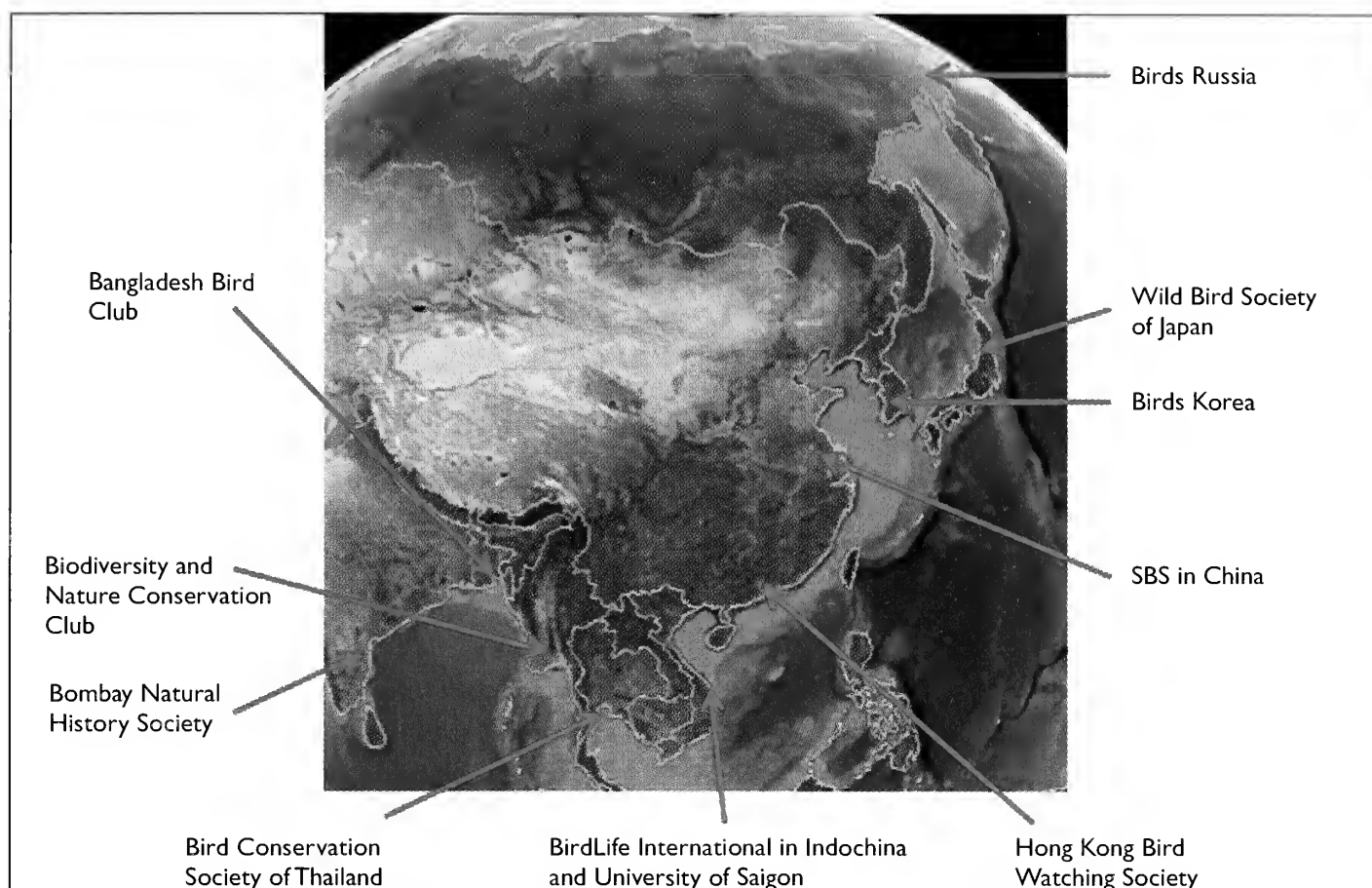
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**Nigel Clark** undertook his PhD on waders, has been involved in studies on waders in many countries around the world over the last 40 years and chairs the UK Spoon-billed Sandpiper Support Group. **Debbie Pain** is Director of Conservation at WWT. She has spent much of the last 20 years working on the conservation of threatened bird species, initially as Head of International Research at RSPB, and latterly at WWT. She is a co-author of *Facing Extinction: the world's rarest birds and the race to save them*. **Rhys Green** is Principal Research Biologist at the RSPB and works in the Conservation Science Group at the Department of Zoology, University of Cambridge. He undertakes research on the management of threatened species and the effects of agricultural development, pollution and climatic change on birds and other biodiversity.



**Fig. 3.** The Spoon-billed Sandpiper conservation partnership.



## **Organisations contributing funds or expertise to the conservation effort**

Arcona; Australasian Wader Study Group of Birds Australia; Avios; British Airways Communities & Conservation Scheme; *British Birds*; BBC Wildlife Fund; BTO; Chester Zoo; Convention on Migratory Species; German, Scandinavian and UK Spoon-billed Sandpiper Support Groups; Heritage Expeditions; Leica Camera AG; Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund; Moscow Zoo; New South Wales Wader Study Group; New Zealand Department of Conservation; Olive Herbert Charitable Trust; Oriental Bird Club; OSME; Packard Foundation; Queensland Wader Study Group; RSPB; SOS – Save our Species; UK Government’s Darwin Initiative; Wader Quest; WWWT; WildSounds  
and  
many private donors and experts giving their time

## **Bringing it all together**

The Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force  
of  
The East Asian–Australasian Flyway Partnership  
and BirdLife International



# The Carl Zeiss Award 2014

Introduced in December 1991 (*Brit. Birds* 84: 589), the Carl Zeiss Award is presented to the photographer who supplies the most helpful, interesting and/or instructive photographs of a rarity, taken in Britain during the year in question (in this case 2013). Defining 'helpful, interesting and/or instructive' frequently leads to an in-depth discussion among the BBRC voting members of what criteria should apply for selection and scoring. Ultimately it comes down to individual preferences among those members, but some common themes emerge. The shortlisted and high-scoring images are sometimes instructive, but just as often they provide a definitive record of a rare bird that would most likely have escaped the record books – sometimes because the identification was incorrect but much more often because there was insufficient documentation to prove the identification without that photographic evidence. Such images are extremely helpful to the Committee's work and should therefore be considered worthy candidates and potential winners. To this end, it is not important whether the photographer realised the importance of the image at the time they pressed the shutter. The critical thing is that they captured the image and that it was subsequently judged to be helpful, interesting and/or instructive.

The year 2013 was an exceptional one for extremely rare birds and some of the really

headline-grabbing records understandably made the shortlist. There is a real theme this year, with a number of images breaking a 'credibility barrier' for a species or plumage to be considered and accepted in Britain. Others involved records of taxa which are particularly difficult to identify, or birds showing characters that suggested potential hybridisation, and these challenge the Committee to determine where to set thresholds of acceptability. Given the challenges involved, the assessment process of several of the birds referred to in this article was completed a matter of days before this issue of *BB* went to press. It is understandable that high standards of photographic documentation of such difficult records should lend themselves as candidates for the award.

Among the shortlisted images, the Baikal Teal *Anas formosa* at Crossens Outer Marsh, Southport, Lancashire & North Merseyside, created significant debate following the publication of Craig Bell's images in November. In the past, bizarre, lookalike hybrids have masqueraded as Baikal Teals, but it quickly became clear that the apparently atypical facial markings of the Southport bird were not necessarily atypical after all. Craig's images were undoubtedly instructive in improving our knowledge in the variation of this rare vagrant from the east. James Hanlon's photographs of a juvenile 'Northern Harrier' *Circus cyaneus hudsonius* at the Ouse

Roger Riddington



Roger Riddington

**246. Fifth equal** Adult Pacific Diver *Gavia pacifica*, Grutness, Mainland Shetland, May 2013.

Washes RSPB reserve, Cambridgeshire, in October provided pin-sharp resolution of the salient features of this still tricky-to-confirm plumage. They also helped to further our understanding of potential plumage variation and the criteria for acceptance. Mark Pearson's Brännich's Guillemot *Uria lomvia* at Filey, Yorkshire, in December was definitely one of those birds that lifted the credibility barrier. With such good-quality images there was no doubt about the identification and the bird has duly been accepted as the first confirmed record for England since July 1977. There have been a number of 'close calls' submitted in recent years, but the circumstances of those observations caused the record to fall (just) short of an acceptable Brännich's. With a well-watched (and much appreciated) second Brännich's at Portland, Dorset, later in the same month, we wait with interest to see whether the suggestion that this species should be a more regular visitor to English waters will be proved correct (van Bemmelen & Wielstra 2008). Paul Rowe's skill in capturing the diagnostic pattern of the outermost tail feather of the Western Orphean Warbler *Sylvia hortensis* at St Brides, Pembrokeshire, in November was instrumental in assigning the Welsh bird to this recently split species. The images of the 'Caspian Stonechat' *Saxicola maurus variegatus* captured by Alastair Wilson on St Agnes, Scilly, in November were selected as being pivotal in the correct identification of this individual. Alastair's terrific image of the conveniently splayed uppertail leaves no doubt that this individual is a first-winter male of the northern form that breeds



John Bratten

**247. Fifth equal** Grey-morph Gyr Falcon *Falco rusticolus*, River Humber, Yorkshire, November 2013.

around the northern Caspian Sea. It has recently been proposed that this taxon should be renamed *S. m. hemprichii* (Svensson *et al.* 2012, and see [www.bbrc.org.uk](http://www.bbrc.org.uk)), based upon the prior use of the name *hemprichii*.

And so to the final shortlist for this year's competition, which comprised six sets of images. There was a two-way tie for fifth place between the Pacific Diver *Gavia pacifica* photographed by BB's very own Roger Riddington at Grutness, Shetland, on 16th May, and a grey-morph Gyr Falcon *Falco rusticolus* photographed by John Bratten on the River Humber in Yorkshire on 23rd November. The diver (found by former Committee man Paul Harvey) represents the first confirmed example of a summer-plumaged Pacific in Britain. Previous claims have been submitted, without photographic evidence, but the Grutness bird is another example where the credibility barrier was overcome by the grainy digiscoped photographs that accompanied the written description. The identification of grey-morph Gyr Falcons is



Tom Whiley



Tom Whiley

**248. Second equal** Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*, Pendeen, Cornwall, August 2013.



Steve Tomlinson



**249. Second equal** First-summer female Dusky Thrush *Turdus eunomus*, Margate, Kent, May 2013.

notoriously difficult, the key complication being the possibility of escaped falconers' birds, which can involve a wide array of parental possibilities, but often incorporate Saker *F. cherrug* genes. While Gyr Falcons are not unexpected vagrants to the northern and

western islands and coast-lines of Britain, they are almost unknown on the east coast and there have been several notable false starts in previous years. The decision to accept the Yorkshire bird was largely dependent on John Bratten's high-quality images.

There was a three-way tie for second place between a Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus* photographed by Tom Whiley at Pendeen, Cornwall on 18th August; the Dusky Thrush *Turdus eunomus* photographed by Steve Tomlinson at Margate, Kent, in May; and the Black-throated Thrush

*T. atrogularis* photographed by Hugh Addlesee at Banchory, North-east Scotland, in March. The tropicbird was something of an exercise in credibility. Anyone with an ear to the ground in the wider birding community will have picked up on the doubts

Hugh Addlesee



**250. Second equal** First-winter male Black-throated Thrush *Turdus atrogularis*, Banchory, North-east Scotland, March 2013.

expressed by those observers watching from this renowned Cornish headline when they learnt that this bird had apparently flown past right under their noses! The votes in favour of this record were clearly in response to the fact that the record would have been too controversial to have been accepted without the definitive images that Tom secured. Voters commented that the initial images of both of the thrushes, which formed part of the subsequent record submissions to BBRC, were not as revealing as some of the later ones, which would also have been worthy of consideration. For the Dusky Thrush, the opportunity to examine the plumage tones and, in particular, the rela-

tively rich brown coloration to some of the underpart feathering in Steve's photographs had caused some discussion within the Committee (and the wider birding community) as to where the thresholds for hybrid influence should be drawn. For the Black-throated Thrush, the reddish feathering at the base of the tail led to similar concerns (this time whether the bird had some Red-throated Thrush *T. ruficollis* genes). For the Dusky Thrush, an examination of museum skins at Tring confirmed that the plumage tones were compatible with individuals collected in the north of the breeding zone and therefore the bird was likely to have been geographically isolated from the influence of the more



Jim Sim

**251. Carl Zeiss Award 2014, winner** Juvenile Ascension Frigatebird *Fregata aquila*, Bowmore, Islay, Argyll, July 2013.

southerly distributed Naumann's Thrush *T. naumanni*. The Black-throated Thrush has now been accepted as such, but the record will be published with a note to say that the plumage characters show some (albeit limited) evidence of Red-throated Thrush *T. ruficollis* genes.

The final set of images in the 2013 competition was a deserved winner. The first Ascension Frigatebird *Fregata aquila* for Britain, found on Tiree, Argyll, in July 1953, lay in a museum tray, masquerading as a Magnificent Frigatebird *F. magnificens* for many years before former BBRC members Grahame Walbridge and Brian Small undertook some excellent detective work to uncover its true identity. The first record was amazing enough, but it is even more extraordinary that, almost exactly 60 years later, the same species turned up again on another island in western Scotland. The close proximity of a famous distillery may have caused some sense of disbelief in the claim – perhaps the observers had been slightly intoxicated and were therefore mistaken! – but the images captured by Jim Sim at Bowmore, Islay, on 5th July left no such doubt. The Islay frigatebird romped home by a large majority in this year's competition, to win Jim a pair of Zeiss binoculars as reward for his efforts. Voters felt that these images provided great documentation of a fantastic record, one that would otherwise so easily have been lost.

They were also instructive in confirming the identification criteria for vagrants of this species. The images were most definitely helpful, interesting and instructive in equal measure.

Jim will be presented with his prize, a pair of the fabulous new ZEISS Victory SF 8 × 42 binoculars (see pp. 481–482), at the British Birdwatching Fair at Rutland Water on Friday 15th August. Further details will be posted on the BBRC website ([www.bbrc.org.uk](http://www.bbrc.org.uk)) in due course, where a selection of previous winning images can be viewed along with links to the previous competition write-ups in *BB*.

#### Acknowledgments

BBRC is grateful to all those observers who submit their photographs for consideration, either directly to the committee or via our arrangement with websites (BirdGuides [www.birdguides.com](http://www.birdguides.com) and Rare Bird Alert [www.rarebirdalert.co.uk](http://www.rarebirdalert.co.uk)). Chris Batty and Nigel Hudson were again instrumental in pulling together the shortlisted images and the voting members of BBRC suggested amendments to the shortlist and voted for their top five. We are extremely grateful to Carl Zeiss for their continued support of the committee and this award.

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**BBRC**

British Birds Rarities Committee



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# Talking point

## What you can achieve when you combine your passions...

One of the most enjoyable aspects of watching birds is meeting new people who share your enthusiasm. Last month, I met Gerry Dobler, Head of Product Management at Zeiss, on my patch at Minsmere RSPB reserve, in Suffolk. His role at Zeiss is to specify exactly what is required from a new product, by crystallising the needs and wants of customers, and to work with the designers to translate these into the specification of every single element of the equipment. Like most of the people reading this editorial, Gerry is passionate about wildlife and watching birds; in his case, that passion has been the catalyst in his drive to create the best binoculars for birdwatching.

Gerry was proudly sporting a prototype of the new Zeiss SF binoculars, which are due to be unveiled in the UK at the 2014 Birdfair. The new binocular is distinctive, with a triple-link bridge between two sleek barrels finished in muted grey rubber armouring. Gerry was quietly confident that these may be the best binoculars ever made for watching wildlife – and given his expertise in the subject, that's no idle claim. Right from the off, Gerry enthused about birds with intricate plumage detail – Great Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* and Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* being two of his particular favourites – and how his knowledge of binocular design has enabled him to develop instruments that bring the detail of such cryptic plumage patterns to life. He confessed that his visit to Minsmere would be crowned by seeing a Bittern. The pressure was on...

The hyperactive Sand Martins *Riparia riparia* buzzing around their colony close to the reserve's Visitor Centre provided an ideal opportunity to showcase the exceptionally wide field of view of the new binoculars (a gargantuan 148 m at 1,000 m in the 8 × 42),

in which the image remains pin sharp right to the edge. This is something that birders above all other users demand. Keeping a fast-moving bird in focus can be critical – if it's flying away, an extra second or two of detail can make the difference between one that got away and one that is inked into the diary at the end of the day!

Our next stop was Bittern hide; frustratingly, the hide did not live up to its moniker and we had to be content with fabulous views of young Marsh Harriers *Circus aeruginosus* over the reedbeds. I explained how the RSPB has managed the reedbed to restore wetter habitat and improve the habitat quality for breeding Bitterns. Gerry remarked on the contrast between the UK and Germany in this interventionist approach to land management, so well-established in the UK, yet not attempted on any significant scale in his native Germany. He was also surprised to hear about the decline of the Water Vole *Arvicola amphibius* in the UK, a species still so abundant in Germany that it is considered a pest and a threat to successful water-level management.

Gerry previously worked for Swarovski,



Adam Rowlands

**252.** Gerry Dobler at Minsmere, July 2014.

where he was the Product Manager in charge of the immensely successful EL binocular range. I saw him smiling as we wandered around the reserve, passing many visitors sporting the familiar ELs. I asked him if he felt proud of his achievements in binocular design. He pondered before replying that it was more satisfaction than pride, the ELs being a significant stage in his continued quest to design the very best instruments for watching wildlife. Gerry has been crafting the SF range for Zeiss with the same optics designer he worked with at Swarovski and described the myriad challenges in developing a product that represents significant progress on existing models. Getting the right team in place has been critical for transforming his ergonomic and optical ideas into a successful pair of binoculars. We talked also about how large companies, such as the leading optics producers, have the potential to do more for conservation. Gerry is bullish about the prospects, full of enthusiasm for the initiatives during his time at Swarovski, and confident of making a real impact on conservation in his current role at Zeiss.

The SF range brings a raft of improvements compared with its predecessors. Greater light transmission is achieved by the innovative design of a new, three-lens objective system. The Zeiss lens coatings achieve an extremely high level of consistency for light transmission for this model, something that I was surprised to learn is unusual with binoculars. Not only can light transmission levels vary (sometimes significantly) between individual pairs for other models, they can even vary between the right and left barrel in the same pair – and this variability has been largely eliminated with the new Zeiss. The shift from five objective lenses to three, coupled with the use of special, thin SCHOTT glass, brings benefits in terms of weight distribution too. In simple terms, the reduced weight of the objective lenses redistributes the balance forward, closer to the eyepieces. The binoculars are already the lightest in their class (780 g for both 8 × 42 and 10 × 42), but because they ‘sit’ better than their rivals, they feel even lighter than they really are. That same redesign also makes it possible to achieve such an enormous field of view.

The devil is most definitely in the detail. The carrying case with its magnetic flip strap, enabling the binoculars to be ready in gun-slinger fashion at a moment’s notice, is an incredibly neat design, although I suspect that most rarity hunters will be more impressed with the focusing system (SF = ‘Smart Focus’), which delivers a sharp image at top speed. Fast focusing can make a critical difference when it comes to processing detail, when you’re trying to nail the tertial pattern of a skulking warbler at dusk in late September. From infinity to the damselfly near the toe end of your boot is a mere 1.8 turns, another marked improvement on these binoculars’ key rivals. The bridge between the barrels lies nearer the eyepiece than in similar models, which both helps the overall balance and makes the binoculars more comfortable to hold. It certainly felt good when scanning the woodland canopy at Minsmere, but Gerry assured me that the differences will be most apparent in really dense habitats, such as a tropical forest or surveying in conifer plantations. It was just one more occasion where it was brought home to me that these binoculars really have been designed by someone who knows what birders want.

We finished our circuit of Minsmere at the Island Mere hide. A last chance to enjoy a glorious summer’s day through the fantastically bright SFs. The sight of an Otter *Lutra lutra* swimming serenely across the mirror-calm surface was clearly a major treat for Gerry, and he forgot about the binoculars’ design as he drank in the detail. And the icing on the cake came when a Bittern dropped into the reeds close to the hide just as we were getting ready to leave. I couldn’t have scripted it better! Even with the new SF, the brief view wasn’t sufficient to appreciate intricate feather detail, but the Bittern was very definitely inked into the notebook. It was the perfect finale to an enjoyable day.

### *Adam Rowlands*

This editorial marks the launch of one of the most significant Zeiss binoculars for watching wildlife in the company’s history, and we include the account here as a way of saying thank you to Zeiss, and to RSPB, for their continued support of BBRC.

## The hearing mechanism of owls

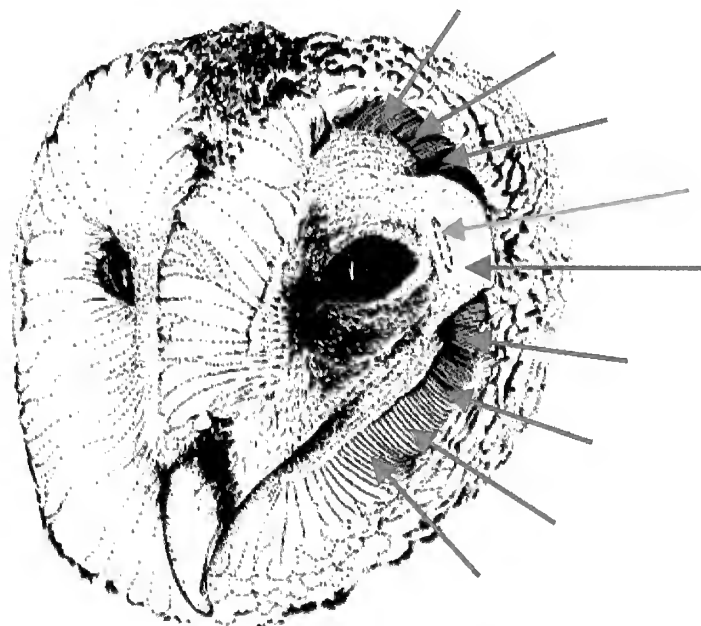
For some time now I have been interested in discovering the mechanism by which owls use their facial discs as sound-capturing devices. Those fellow birders I have discussed it with all seemed to take the concept for granted but had no ideas as to how it is achieved. I was very interested to read Tim Birkhead's very clear references to this in his Bernard Tucker Memorial Lecture (Birkhead 2014), and in particular his comment that 'As far as I know, no-one has ever looked in detail at why the feathers around the facial disc differ so much in structure.'

Earlier this year I discovered a paper that appeared to explain the mechanism fully and the function of the specialised feathers (Coles & Guppy 1988). Brief details follow, but anyone with a keen interest should read the paper in full.

Firstly, the visible feathers of the facial disc appear to do little to contribute to the capture of sound. Perhaps they are adapted to allow sound to pass through them easily, but this is not the key area of specialism. Additionally, they may provide vital protection for a life-or-death sensory system on which the owl relies.

The key mechanism is that sound waves are received and reflected by an array of flattened feathers that form an elongated cup shape behind the owl's ear opening, thus directing a concentrated sound signal into the ear – as Tim described, it is exactly as if we were cupping our hands behind our ears.

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**Fig. 1.** This diagram shows a Barn Owl *Tyto alba* with one half of its facial disc feathers removed. These feathers presumably are adapted to allow sound to pass through very easily. In this modification of a figure from Coles & Guppy (1988), red arrows show the position of 'facial ruff' feathers – short, tough feathers that form a cup behind the ear and that reflect sound of certain wavelengths very well (high-pitched as per rodent squeaks); the blue arrow shows the flap covering the entrance to the ear when viewed from the front; and the yellow arrow shows the entrance to the ear (dotted oval) tucked in behind the 'ear flap' and behind the eye. So, effectively, the owl does exactly what we do when we cup our hands behind our ears to help us hear very quiet or distant bird calls.

The illustration in fig. 1 is adapted from Coles & Guppy's paper.

**Editorial comment** Tim Birkhead has replied as follows: 'I am delighted that Andy Mears has located Coles & Guppy's (1988) paper on owl hearing, since it confirms my suspicion, described in *Bird Sense* (Birkhead 2012: 53), that the role of the dense array of flat, sword-like feathers at the back of the ear flap is to direct sound into the auditory canal. In their highly technical account, Coles & Guppy also speculate about the role of those particular facial ruff feathers on the ability of the Barn Owl *Tyto alba* to perceive sound, but they do not address the fact that the other feathers overlying the facial ruff, at least in the Great Grey Owl *Strix nebulosa* that I examined (and illustrated in Birkhead 2014: 215), differ so much in structure (see Birkhead 2012: 52). For example, the feathers at the bottom left, the lower anterior part of the covering of the facial ruff (visible in plate 98 of Birkhead 2014), each have an unusually broad flat calamus (the hollow part of the proximal end of the feather below the vane), whose function remains, as far as I am



aware, unknown. I would be interested to hear from anyone who knows or can speculate about the function of these particular feathers.'

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## Penguin mortality in the Falklands

I found the article about the Falkland Islands by Sarah Crofts in the June 2014 issue of *British Birds* absolutely fascinating. I was especially interested because, as a veterinary pathologist specialising in wildlife, I was asked by the Falkland Islands Government to investigate the cause of the penguin mortality which occurred in the 1985/86 breeding season.

Sarah dealt with 'modern threats' (1900–present) in some detail, but did not mention the important observation made about the unusually warm weather conditions in the South Atlantic (Bourne 1986). Woods (1988) acknowledged Bourne's paper, and also referred to the detailed work on the diet and population of Gentoo *Pygoscelis papua*, Southern Rockhopper *Eudyptes c. chrysocome* and Magellanic Penguins *Spheniscus magellanicus* as well as Black-browed Albatross *Thalasarche melanophrys*. That work was carried out by biologists Dan Hale and Kate Thompson over two breeding seasons. Robin Woods, when quoting the work I carried out with David Horsley, stated that 'high lead concen-

trations' were found in some of the birds that we examined, when in fact the concentrations were low. Another reason for this short letter is to draw attention to Keymer *et al.* (2001), 'Health evaluation of penguins following mortality in the Falklands'; in hindsight, there is evidence that the mortality may have been an early manifestation of global warming.

As an aside, for anyone interested in the Falklands, the book by Ian Strange (Strange 1983) is essential reading, containing much information about the earliest discoveries of the islands as well as the 1982 conflict.

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## Decline in swift populations

Dick Newell's editorial, and the subsequent note on the International Swift Conference in Cambridge in April 2014 (*Brit. Birds* 107: 244–246, 310–311) make reference to the worthy initiatives to increase the depleted stock of Common Swift *Apus apus* nest sites. At least in some areas, however, a loss of nest sites is not the only cause of the observed decline in populations. In our pantiled cottage in Wangford, and many similar properties in northeast Suffolk villages, once occupied sites

remain available. The continuing decrease in insect food availability is surely just as, if not more, important. When visiting the UK, several of my correspondents from East Africa and France, making comparisons with their local populations, have strongly suggested that the largest cause of declining Swift and other migrant bird populations is not abroad but here in Britain. My response to doubters is to ask: 'When did you last have to wash dead insects off the windscreen of your car?'

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## Pink-footed Geese struck by lightning in winter storm

On 1st February 2014, JH was at the Holkham Estate, in north Norfolk, as guest of Viscount Coke, and noticed a dead Pink-footed Goose *Anser brachyrhynchus* on some stubble. The estate's head keeper said that on 25th January 2014 there had been a terrific thunderstorm in the area at around 3.30 pm. He described an exceptionally fierce storm, with 'cloud cover at ground level', during which a strike of lightning hit a skein of Pinkfeet and killed in excess of 70 of them. More than 40 were picked up dead, with numerous dying individuals being found the next day. The total may have been 100+.

AB was aware of 19 Pink-footed Geese found dead at Warham (on an adjacent farm, but still part of the Holkham Estate) the morning after the storm (the birds were picked up on 26th). These 19 were spread over three fields and some had visible scorch marks from a lightning strike. It later transpired that others (c. 20) were found a few miles to the east, at Binham and Langham, suggesting that many more might have perished over a broader front. Not all of the

dead geese had 'scorch marks'; indeed, some were actually unmarked. An examination carried out on some of these birds found that their livers had exploded, and it seems that the birds were more likely to have been killed as a result of a rapid change to much greater air pressure as the geese flew higher to escape the storm.

Such incidents are rare but not unprecedented. A previous storm, in 1978, was described by Wally Thrower in the 1979 *Norfolk Bird & Mammal Report* (and reprinted in *Wild Goose Winter*, McCallum 2001).

The 2014 storm was intense over a broad front (JH was in Newark, Nottinghamshire, on 25th January 2014, where the storm was also intense), so it may be that many geese, flighting to and from feeding sites around the Wash, may have been affected.

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## Marbled Ducks breeding in Sardinia and Sicily

The Marbled Duck *Marmaronetta angustirostris* is classified as 'Vulnerable' by the IUCN. Four separate biogeographical populations have been identified; the west Mediterranean population breeds in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Spain and is believed to winter in North Africa and sub-Saharan West Africa. Largely because of extensive habitat loss, but also fluctuating patterns of rainfall and water levels in wetland areas, the population declined throughout much of the twentieth century, although the last 20 years or so have seen some recovery. In Spain, for example, the population declined from several thousand pairs at the end of the nineteenth century to

30–40 pairs in 1994 (BirdLife International 2004), recovering to 96 pairs in 2007, with a handful of pairs now breeding in the Balearics and 30–200 pairs in the Canary Islands during 1994–2001 (Martí & del Moral 2003; GOB 2010). However, this apparent increase in the west Mediterranean population may reflect improved awareness and observer coverage rather than a true increase ([www.birdlife.org](http://www.birdlife.org)).

The Marbled Duck has always been a rare and irregular visitor to Italy. The species may have bred occasionally in the past, although there is no confirmed evidence. For example, about 50 documented records in the nineteenth century included a group of c. 70 in

June–August 1892 on Lago di Massacciucoli near Lucca, Tuscany, which led Giglioli (1907) to suspect that breeding had occurred. There were just 20 records of Marbled Duck in Italy in the twentieth century but, since 2000, breeding has occurred in Sicily, the first confirmed breeding records for Italy. This note documents a further breeding record, from Sardinia in 2013.

### Breeding in Sardinia

On 5th May 2013, MP discovered a pair of Marbled Ducks on a wetland in southwestern Sardinia. The site was visited regularly after that and on 30th June a female and 14 ducklings (judged to be about one week old) were seen (plate 253). Fourteen young were still present on 10th July, but the brood had declined to ten on 4th August, while at least four and possibly six young were present on 19th August.

The wetland concerned is rich with emergent vegetation, including *Phragmites australis*, *Thypha*, *Juncus*, *Carex*, similar to the breeding sites elsewhere in the species' range (Green 1996). Since the incubation period is approximately 25–27 days (BWP), the first observation suggests that the clutch was completed around 28th May, followed by hatching on or about 23rd June. In Spain, broods have been recorded between mid April and mid September, with a mean hatch date of 20th June (Green 1996).

There are about ten historical records of Marbled Duck in Sardinia, two in the twentieth century (Grussu 2001; Brichetti & Fracasso 2003), an adult bird near Portoscuso, Cagliari, on 27th May 2007 and then up to

three birds present in wetlands near Portoscuso from 26th August to 3rd October 2012 (MP and MG pers. obs., Roberta Corsi pers. comm.). Clearly, the habitat conditions in southwest Sardinia are currently suitable for breeding and, if these can be maintained, it is hoped that further breeding will occur. The species is fairly numerous in North Africa (several thousand were recently discovered in Algeria and Tunisia; [www.birdlife.org](http://www.birdlife.org)), and this is probably the source of the recent records in Sardinia.

### Breeding in Sicily

In 2000, five adults, including one pair with eight chicks, were found in the Trapani region of western Sicily (Sciabica 2002). Subsequently, 1–2 pairs have occasionally nested at this site, while 1–3 pairs have bred irregularly in southeastern Sicily (Corso 2005; Ruggieri & Sighele 2007; Ruggieri & Nicoli 2009; Nicoli *et al.* 2011). There were six records (of 1–15 birds) in Sicily in 2012 but breeding was not established in that year. It appears that the status of Marbled Duck in Sicily is slowly changing from that of a vagrant and occasional breeder; most records are in the period from April to September, but it remains rare in winter (Corso 2005; Nicoli *et al.* 2013).

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Massimiliano Podda



**253.** Adult Marbled Duck *Marmaronetta angustirostris* with 14 ducklings (approximately seven days old), Sardinia, June 2013. The first breeding record of this species in Sardinia.



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## Fishing technique of a Little Egret

On 25th August 2013, in the Fleet near Ferry-bridge, Portland, Dorset, I watched a Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* catching small fish using a technique that was new to me. The egret was standing up to its belly in the water with its neck extended and the lower half of its bill just under the water's surface. By quickly opening and closing its bill slightly it caused small ripples to form. The egret agitated the water for a short time, then stopped, before repeating the process several

times. Although not always successful, it did catch three or four small fish while I was watching. The reason for the egret rippling the water in this fashion was unclear to me. The water was slightly choppy at the time, so did the ripples enable the egret to see more clearly beneath the surface? Or did the ripples bring smaller fish closer and make them easier to catch? Whatever the reason, the behaviour was fascinating to watch.

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## Mediterranean Gulls in Alderney

Saunders (2007) considered the Mediterranean Gull *Larus melanocephalus* to be a rare visitor to Alderney, with one record in the 1980s, four in the 1990s and one later record in 2005. More recently, Young *et al.* (2012) listed it as a scarce migrant and winter visitor to Alderney and Guernsey, whereas its status in Jersey is that of a mainly spring and autumn migrant with 293 records in 2008 and 361 in 2009. This suggests that it is under-recorded on the poorly covered smaller islands and this note presents evidence suggesting that it is a regular summer visitor to Alderney.

I recorded Mediterranean Gulls on each of six week-long visits to Alderney in July–August between 2005 and 2013. Peak counts included 11 (eight adults, three juveniles) on 29th July 2011, and eight (five adults, two

subadults and one juvenile) on 10th August 2009. Across all visits, Mediterranean Gulls were recorded on most days between 25th July and 17th August. Out of a total of 44 aged birds, 31 (70%) were adults, eight (18%) subadults and five (11%) juveniles. These observations suggest that the status of the Mediterranean Gull on Alderney has changed since the late 1990s, and that it is now a regular visitor at least. This is in line with the well-documented expansion of the Mediterranean Gull population in Britain and western Europe over the last 20 years (e.g. Hagemeijer & Blair 1997, Balmer *et al.* 2013).

None of the Mediterranean Gulls seen on Alderney were colour-marked so their origin is unknown. However, a colour-ringed Mediterranean Gull recorded on Guernsey in

2003 originated from Belgium (Lawlor 2004). Large-scale ringing of this species in the Netherlands and Belgium showed a peak of marked individuals in northwest France from July to September, as they head towards their wintering areas around Iberia (Meininger *et al.* 1999). This timing fits well with the summer passage noted on Alderney, although the rapidly expanding colonies in southern England (Balmer *et al.* 2013; Hume 2013) may be an alternative source.

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Note: There is currently no recorder for Alderney. To help build up a better picture of occurrences please send further sightings to Alderney Wildlife Trust, 51 Victoria Street, Alderney, Channel Islands GY9 3TA; e-mail: [ecologist@alderneywildlife.org](mailto:ecologist@alderneywildlife.org)

## Beach foraging by Kittiwakes

On 23rd August 2013, 15–20 (Black-legged) Kittiwakes *Rissa tridactyla* were seen feeding on sandeels (*Ammodytes* spp.) emerging from the sand on Bishop's Beach, Homer, in Alaska. The Kittiwakes were standing on the beach near the rising tideline, waiting for sandeels to emerge. When a sandeel

appeared, a Kittiwake walked or flew towards it, pulled it out of the sand and ate it. Kittiwakes have been recorded feeding in the intertidal zone on barnacles in Newfoundland (Threlfall 1968) but this is thought to be exceptional behaviour (Coulson 2011). I can find no record of Kittiwakes feeding on fish

species at the shoreline, so this observed behaviour also appears to be exceptional.

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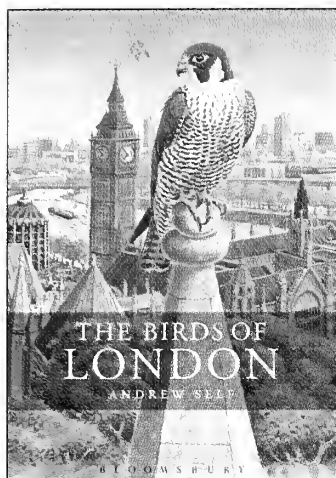
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Lorraine Chivers

**254.** Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* feeding on sandeels, Homer, Alaska, August 2013.

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## The Birds of London

By Andrew Self

Helm, 2014

Hbk, 432pp; 24 vignettes, 38 histograms and one map;

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This is the first completely new avifauna of London since Collins published *The*

*Birds of the London Area* in 1957. That was updated in 1964, with a 28-page addendum covering 1955–61, but since then there have been only two breeding atlases, published in 1977 and 2002. So this book is long overdue.

It is the ninth in the Pica/Helm series of county avifaunas, which started in 1999 with *The Birds of Norfolk*. It follows the same design used in previous volumes, with the text printed in a single column in a small font in black throughout and 32 pages of colour photographs bound together near the beginning of the book. Compared with the striking designs employed elsewhere (such as for *The Birds of Sussex*, *Brit. Birds* 107: 300–301), this is now becoming extremely dated.

The book opens with a very brief introduction to the history of London and of bird recording in the city. Since 1921 the London Natural History Society (LNHS) has published an annual report covering the area within a 20-mile radius of St Paul's Cathedral, initially in *The London Naturalist* and from 1936 as the *London Bird Report*. This is followed by 'Discoveries and Dates', which gives a referenced chronological list of the first record of each species, starting with Red Kite *Milvus milvus* in the second century, and a calendar of the finding of rarities. 'Habitats and Geography' offers a succinct summary of important places for birds, including the River Thames, numerous reservoirs and gravel-pits, the Royal Parks and other open spaces. 'Important London Naturalists and Ornithologists' comprises brief pen portraits of now-deceased luminaries such as Stanley Cramp, Richard Fitter, Peter Grant, Max Nicholson and Eric Simms. 'Green Spaces in London' is an alphabetical listing of important localities, with information about their ornithological highlights and details of site-specific publications; two important sites, Wraysbury Gravel-pits and Wraysbury Reser-

voir, appear to have been omitted in error. A rather poor map of the recording area shows the main rivers and roads and the location of 20 important sites. Confusingly, only 14 of these are described in the Green Spaces chapter while over 25 included in that chapter are not shown on the map!

The colour section comprises nine pages of habitat pictures and 23 of birds, generally with two images per page. The habitat photographs are mostly superb and illustrate a wide range of situations; the bird pictures are also good, with captions pertinent to the species' status in London, although date and location details have unfortunately been omitted in many cases.

The main species accounts comprise the bulk of the book, some 380 pages. The accounts of regularly occurring species follow a similar pattern, with subsections entitled 'Historical', '20th Century', '21st Century' and 'Facts and Figures'. The Historical sections summarise pre-1900 records, which were not included in the *Birds of the London Area*, and thus it is the first time that this information has been pulled together. It is a fascinating mix of interesting sightings; for example, there are bizarre records of a Common Guillemot *Uria aalge* picked up alive in Russell Square after a gale in spring 1883 and a Puffin *Fratercula arctica* that flew through an open window into a house in Brook Street, Mayfair, on 16th May 1887. The sources of these two sightings are not given and, unfortunately, most other occurrences described are not referenced.

The 20th-century sections largely replicate the information provided in *Birds of the London Area*, complemented with summaries of post 1961 records. These pick out highlights in the occurrence of winter visitors and migrants. They seem to be a rather arbitrary selection and little analysis of the records has been attempted. Wildfowl counts have been a prominent feature of London birding since the early 1950s, with long series of data available for sites such as Staines Reservoir and the Walton group of reservoirs, yet these have

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not been summarised. The author has mostly cherry-picked outstandingly high counts of each species, usually connected with severe winter weather or unusual food concentrations, rather than examining trends in numbers. Breeding species are treated in rather more detail with an account of changes between the two atlases, which covered 1968–72 and 1988–94.

The 21st-century sections are, surprisingly, the shortest parts of the species accounts. Histograms of monthly occurrence are given for around 30 ducks, raptors, waders and terns. The treatment is not consistent; Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica* and Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea* get histograms but Black-tailed Godwit *L. limosa* and Little Stint *C. minuta* don't, and only six passerines warrant such treatment. As in the previous sections, unusually high counts have been highlighted but in general very little detail is provided; readers will have to continue to refer to the *London Bird Reports* to get the data they need. Most of the information included for breeders is piecemeal, the accounts having been compiled before the results of the 2007–11 Atlas were available.

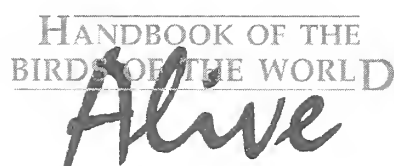
The Facts and Figures sections include details of first and last dates and also high counts for each species; this information is usually repeated from the previous sections and so seems superfluous.

The treatment of scarcer visitors and vagrants is different. Most get a well-written chronological narrative of records followed by a list of the same records, which simply repeats the information in a

different format. Only three species get histograms of monthly occurrences. The book is completed with appendices listing escapes and species not accepted, a four-page bibliography and a gazetteer.

Andrew Self has single-handedly taken on the herculean task of writing an up-to-date avifauna of London. However, in my opinion this book represents a missed opportunity to present a thorough analysis of the wealth of data that has been collected over the last 60 years and published in the *London Bird Reports*; in particular the most recent information from the present century has been glossed over. A detailed history of London ornithology is notably lacking; a starting point would have been to combine and flesh out the information in the Introduction, Discoveries and Dates, and Important London Naturalists sections as well as including prominent people who are still with us. Although this is an avifauna rather than an atlas, the complete lack of maps is a disappointment, and perhaps this book should have been delayed until the 2007–11 Atlas data were available. As alluded to above, the design is a tired format and the editing has been less than thorough. At £50.00, the price does not represent the best value for money compared with other recent avifaunas. Many keen London birders and collectors of county bird books will wish to own a copy, although I don't think that it will appeal to less serious birders.

John Clark



**HBW Alive**

[www.hbw.com](http://www.hbw.com)

Basic Annual Subscription €29.95,

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If you were sent to a desert island and were allowed to take just one bird book with you, which one would you choose? In my case it would have to be the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* (HBW). OK, so that is cheating a little as this is, of course, a 17-volume book. If you possess the full set, then you'll know that it takes up almost a metre of your bookshelves. But now the online version of HBW is available. While I love the pleasure of dipping into a well-illustrated book, would I enjoy doing the same on my computer?

For those who are not familiar with HBW in traditional format, it contains 13,367 pages written by 277 experts, 10,200 maps, over 20,600 figures, and about 100,000 bibliographic references. We are talking about 15 million words of text. However,

with improved DNA analysis the changes in our understanding of taxonomy are occurring more frequently than they did when the first volume of HBW appeared. It is a sad fact that those beautiful volumes are, in reality, a static statement of expert opinion at the time of publication – and they will become outdated more rapidly than we ever imagined.

So what do you get with the online version, HBW Alive? It contains the full accounts for every bird species that was included in the 17 volumes, although not the 15 species for which original scientific descriptions were published in Vol. 17. The accounts appear in normal-size text (not the tiny font that was used in the books). Each description includes the distribution map and the

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colour illustrations from the book – all of which can be enlarged on your page. The maps have been updated with colour to indicate seasonal changes. A section describing ‘Voice’, which was lacking in the early *HBW* volumes, is currently being added to all bird species accounts. In addition, there are links to photographs and videos submitted to the *HBW* free site – Internet Bird Collection (<http://ibc.lynxeds.com>), which hosts some 82,000 videos, 111,000 photographs and 12,000 sound recordings covering 94% of the bird species of the world. An interesting facility is the ability to compare different species side by side – comparing any aspect that interests you.

I particularly enjoyed reading the family chapters, which are often up to 50,000 words or more in length. These are all included – although, for copyright reasons, without the colour photographs that graced the book. These chapters cover systematics, morphological aspects, habitat, general habits, voice, food and feeding, breeding, relationships with man, and status and conservation. Within these texts are hyperlinks to photographs and videos, which add value – particularly when showing certain aspects of behaviour or display. Each species account has a list of bibliographic references, and in some cases there are hyperlinks to a PDF of the original paper or the journal website. New references are being added each month and almost 7,000 extra bibliographic references have already been added to those used in the printed version.

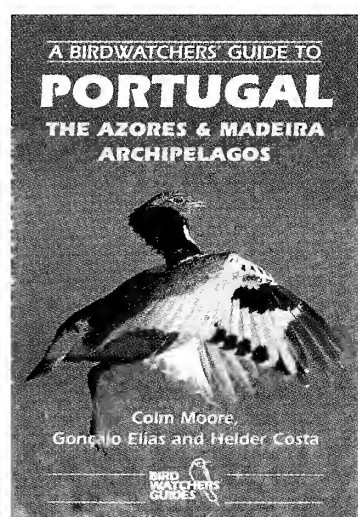
For those who want to follow the *HBW* taxonomy, a tool is provided to generate and keep personal notes on each bird species. In addition,

for travelling birders, printable country checklists can be generated, with the option of including colour illustrations of every species. These customised checklists can be printed or exported to Excel or Word. Tutorials are provided that explain how everything works; these are essential reading, without which you will definitely miss out on some of the more interesting facilities.

What I have described so far is what you can do with a basic-level membership. If, however, you upgrade to become a Supporting Member, then you can access a bird database called ‘My Birding’. This enables you to keep track of your own records. Exactly how you are able to follow any future splits recognised by *HBW* and move your sightings accordingly remains to be seen. While this is an attractive option, it does require a leap of faith on your part that *HBW Alive* will always be there in the future, and that their cyber security is sufficient to ensure that there is no catastrophic loss of your data.

Having used *HBW Alive* for nine months now, I can thoroughly recommend it. The proof of how good this facility is must be that I have not touched any of the 17 hard-copy volumes during that time. They have remained on the bookshelf gathering dust. In a way that is a shame – but it is the way of the future. That said, I have actually accessed far more *HBW* information in the last nine months than in the previous nine years. So, on a personal level, *HBW Alive* has brought me closer to the information that I need – and surely that is what publishing is all about.

Keith Betton



## A Birdwatchers' Guide to Portugal, the Azores and Madeira Archipelagos

By Colm Moore, Goncalo Elias and Helder Costa  
Birdwatchers' Guides, 2014

Pbk, 212pp; 18 black-and-white line-drawings, 35 maps

ISBN 978-1-871104-13-4 Subbuteo code M16197

£17.99 *BB Bookshop* price £16.00

The Prion Birdwatchers' Guide series was launched in 1988 with the

publication of a guide to Nepal. This latest guide is a new and enlarged edition of the authors' original guide to Portugal and Madeira, published in 1998. Several new sites for mainland Portugal have been added and the section on Madeira has been

extended to four chapters to cover the uninhabited Desertas and Selvagens archipelagos. This edition has been augmented by nine sections on the Azores archipelago, one for each island, and includes rarity hotspots; these being particularly helpful for European birders seeking to increase their Western Palearctic lists with Nearctic rarities.

Some 150 pages are devoted to a breakdown of the main sites. For mainland Portugal, these are

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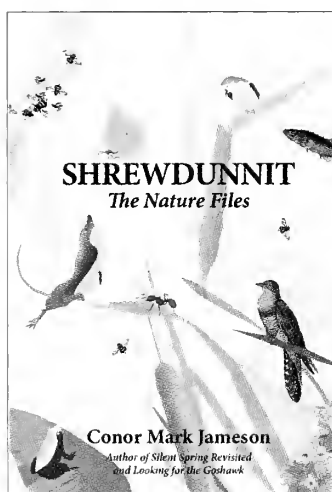


grouped into chapters corresponding approximately to the five main regions into which the country is usually divided. A selection of the best birding sites is included in each chapter. The information for the Azores and Madeira is presented island by island. Simple and clear maps are provided, with references to larger-scale maps available in the country. The co-ordinates are given for all mainland sites. A wealth of detail is provided for each location, which should make finding particular species fairly straightforward. To supplement this, species lists at the end of the book include a 'Selective Bird List' of the special and scarcer birds, as well as a 'Full Bird List' for mainland Portugal, and an Azores list that includes all the Nearctic vagrants recorded up to December 2013. Lists for amphibians and reptiles are also provided. With the help of this comprehensive guide, you have the ingredients for a first-class

birding holiday or trip.

The tried and tested Prion formula ensures that detailed and accurate information is provided, and the three very experienced and knowledgeable authors have met their remit well in this respect. However, the narrative format with long unbroken text, often for more than a whole page, is heavy to work through and to pull out the desired information. Prion needs to consider how it could break down the text, perhaps by using different-sized fonts, and tables or lists, rather than continuous prose. The use of colour might add to the cost, but would give a more modern look and facilitate access to the information. A facelift is surely needed to justify its continuing claim to publish 'the ultimate in birdwatching site guides'.

*Tony Marr*



### **Shrewdunnit: the nature files**

By Conor Mark Jameson

Pelagic Publishing, 2014

Hbk, 281pp; line-drawings by author

ISBN 978-1-907807-76-3 Subbuteo code M24194

£19.99 BB Bookshop price £18.00

When I began this book, I promised myself I would read a bit each day; some hopes! I found myself

enjoying it so much that I got through it in about three sittings. It is beautifully written, full of simple yet unerringly apt description and well laced with wit and wisdom. I can best describe it, I think, as a collection of essays, some already published but others not, penned by a man who, in another age, would be an essayist, not a mere writer of articles.

Conor takes us through the year, grouping his shortish pieces by seasons and by months. The topics are wide-ranging and the subject matter is wildlife – this is not a book just about birds, although they feature prominently throughout. Occasionally we are taken to such far-flung places as the Seychelles or New Zealand, but most often the setting is at or around the author's home patch in rural Bedfordshire. There we find Conor looking at everyday (well, almost) birds, beasts and plants, discovering new things, rediscovering the

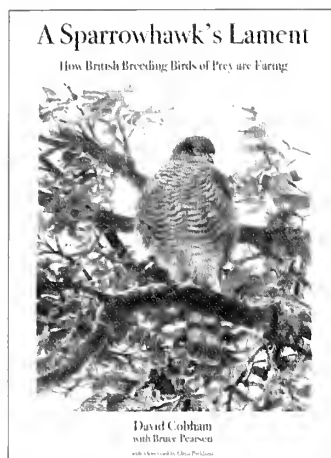
familiar and finding something at which to marvel in all of them. There is a sense of wonder about it all that makes you want to go out there and look again for yourself. There should be more books like this, where birds and the rest are enjoyed for what they are and are not reduced to being mere ciphers in travelogues or tales of people's listing exploits.

You must read it yourself to find out about the unusual title. You should read it anyway. Let me finish this unashamed total recommendation by quoting Jameson on a familiar bird to most of us: 'A soaring buzzard often has an entourage of irate crows, flailing in its wake. This serves mainly to emphasise how expert a flier a buzzard is, how much more refined its lines, how dignified its progress. Cool. Chilled out. Effortless. Serene. A ballet within a brawl, protected from the blows of its assailants by some invisible field created by total balance and mastery of the air.' Anthropomorphic perhaps, but what a wonderful way to write about a bird!

*Mike Everett*







## A Sparrowhawk's Lament: how British breeding birds of prey are faring

David Cobham with Bruce Pearson

Princeton University Press, 2014

Hbk, 272pp; black-and-white drawings throughout

ISBN 978-0-691-15764-1 Subbuteo code M24130

£24.95 BB Bookshop price £22.00

This is a thoughtful and deeply personal book by someone who

has spent a lifetime indulging his keen interest in Britain's 15 breeding birds of prey. Although the primary aim of the book is to provide a snapshot of how these birds are faring now, it also includes much useful historical context to help set the scene. This includes a refreshing mix of the author's own anecdotes, including early formative encounters with each species, as well as broader information about their history in Britain – from initial discovery and naming through to the present day. Many of David Cobham's stories derive from his role in making wildlife films and television programmes during his career as a producer and director.

As part of the research for the book the author conducted a wide-ranging series of interviews with those most closely involved with each species, many out in the field while watching the birds in question. He spoke to a broad range of people including conservationists and scientists, as well as writers, film-makers, artists and poets. This provides insight into the main conservation issues affecting each species and explores the evolving public perceptions of a group that can, at times, polarise opinion. The chapters cleverly weave together extracts from these interviews and from the author's own diary, helping to make the accounts lively, engaging and thought-provoking.

When reading through the book it becomes apparent just how mixed the picture is in respect of our breeding raptors. The good news is that

populations of most species are either stable or increasing, though for some this represents a far-from-complete recovery from dramatic population declines caused by past persecution. Reintroduction has helped to restore the fortunes of four species, though all still have a long way to go before they are as widespread as they once were. Just four species have suffered recent declines including two, Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* and Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, which are thankfully still common and widespread. It is in the uplands where the story becomes more disheartening. The Merlin *F. columbarius* and Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* have both declined in recent years with the latter struggling to survive as a breeding bird in England. In upland parts of their range the Northern Goshawk *A. gentilis* and Peregrine Falcon *F. peregrinus* have also suffered, offering a stark contrast to the Peregrine's successful colonisation of lowland areas, including many of our towns and cities. In the accounts for these species we are repeatedly drawn back to the book's title and reminded of the severe damage that is still sometimes inflicted on our birds of prey.

The book is illustrated throughout with Bruce Pearson's captivating drawings. These are all in black and white, with the exception of a flash of yellow-orange in the eye of the Sparrowhawk on the front-cover, staring out at the reader. The introduction to the book provides a good indication as to what it might be thinking.

Ian Carter

## Running Wild

By Mike Tomkies; Whittles Publishing, 2014; pbk, 171pp; ISBN 978-1-84995-123-4  
Subbuteo code M24193 £18.99 BB Bookshop price £17.00

Mike Tomkies will be a familiar name to many readers from his previous books about living 'wild' in remote locations and studying the local wildlife. This latest book covers a protracted period, ending when he is well into his seventies, though his advancing age doesn't appear to have dulled his enthusiasm for wildlife. There are long, diary-style accounts of days spent in the field, observing and filming a wide range of different species, with his favourite, the Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*, often centre stage. This may not be to everyone's taste but, if you have enjoyed his previous books, the chances are you will enjoy this one too.

Ian Carter

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# Recent reports

Compiled by Barry Nightingale and Harry Hussey

This summary of unchecked reports covers the period from early June to early July 2014.

**Headlines** During what can be a quiet period there were some top-drawer rarities, including a Black Scoter off Cleveland, a Black-browed Albatross off the Dorset coast, a Bridled Tern on Fair Isle then the Farne Islands, Eurasian Scops Owl in Orkney and Shetland and White-throated Sparrows in Suffolk and Argyll. Adding to the mix were Little Bittern and Black-winged Pratincole in North-east England, Forster's Tern in Ireland, Lesser Grey Shrike in Shetland and Laughing Gull on Fair Isle, with another two Laughing Gulls in Ireland. All of that in addition to the long-staying Short-toed Eagle and Ross's Gull in southern England.

**American Wigeon** *Anas americana* A long-stayer in Argyll to 10th June; others in North-east Scotland, Outer Hebrides and Perth & Kinross, all arriving 12th–21st June. **Blue-winged Teal** *Anas discors* Loch of Strathbeg (North-east Scotland), 14th–28th June; Idle Valley (Nottinghamshire), 2nd July. **Lesser Scaup** *Aythya affinis* Frodsham Marsh (Cheshire & Wirral), long-stayer to 19th June; Lough Beg (Co. Derry), 12th–15th June; Sandbach Flashes (Cheshire & Wirral), 16th–17th June; Blagdon Lake (Avon), 28th June to 6th July. **King Eider** *Somateria spectabilis* Ythan Estuary (North-east Scotland), long-stayer to 27th June. **Black Scoter** *Melanitta americana* Redcar (Cleveland), 16th–18th June. **Surf Scoter** *Melanitta perspicillata* Long-stayers in Highland to 13th June and North-east Scotland to 1st July.

**Black-browed Albatross** *Thalassarche melanophris* Portland Bill, then Durlston CP

(both Dorset), 5th July.

**Little Bittern** *Ixobrychus minutus* Gosforth Park (Northumberland), 22nd–27th June. **Night Heron** *Nycticorax nycticorax* Cosmeston Lakes (East Glamorgan), 12th–15th June; Rainham Marshes (Essex/Greater London), 12th June; Cheltenham (Gloucestershire), 12th–13th June and 6th–7th July; Ham Wall RSPB (Somerset), 20th–22nd June, with three there on 4th July. **Squacco Heron** *Ardeola ralloides* Ouse Washes (Cambridgeshire), 9th–10th June. **Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus ibis* Tacumshin (Co. Wexford), two long-stayers to 15th June; Huntspill River (Somerset), 9th June; Brading Marshes (Isle of Wight), 9th June; Cullahill (Co. Laois), 22nd June; Hillsborough Park Lake (Co. Down), 28th June to 6th July; Whitley Bay (Northumberland), 1st July. **Little Egret** *Egretta garzetta* Nene Washes (Cambridgeshire), a count of at least 299 in late June.

John Whitting



255. Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus* with young, Cliffe Pools, Kent, June 2014.



Roger Riddington

**256.** Bridled Tern *Onychoprion anaethetus*, Fair Isle, June 2014.

**Purple Heron** *Ardea purpurea* Skomer (Pembrokeshire), 11th June; Crossmichael (Dumfries & Galloway), 12th June; Dale (Pembrokeshire), 13th June; Ham Wall, 18th June; Clodgy Point (Cornwall), 22nd June; Blashford Lakes (Hampshire), 4th July. **Black Stork** *Ciconia nigra* Newby (Yorkshire), 10th June. **Glossy Ibis** *Plegadis falcinellus* Records of mostly singles from Cambridgeshire, Co. Cork (three), Cumbria, Derbyshire, Dorset, Essex, Forth, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Kent, Leicestershire & Rutland, Co. Limerick, Lincolnshire, Co. Louth, Norfolk (four), Oxfordshire, Perth & Kinross, Co. Roscommon, Suffolk, Isle of Wight and Yorkshire.

**Black Kite** *Milvus migrans* There were reports from Devon, Essex, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, Norfolk, Shetland, Warwickshire and Yorkshire, all the birds arriving during 12th–22nd June. **Short-toed Eagle** *Circaetus gallicus* Ashdown Forest (Sussex), long-stayer 10th, 15th–22nd, and 24th–29th June. Same individual also at various sites in Hampshire, intermittently to 5th July.

**Black-winged Stilt** *Himantopus himantopus* Cliffe Pools (Kent), breeding pair with four young to 15th June, two young to 17th; Bracklesham Bay (Sussex), breeding pair with three young to 9th July. **American Golden Plover** *Pluvialis dominica* Tarmon Hill, the Mullet (Co. Mayo), 1st July. **Spotted Sandpiper** *Actitis macularius* Baron's Haugh

(Clyde), 6th July. **Black-winged Pratincole** *Glareola nordmanni* Hauxley (Northumberland), 12th June, then Saltholme (Cleveland), 13th June and Hurworth Burn Resr (Co. Durham), 5th–6th July.

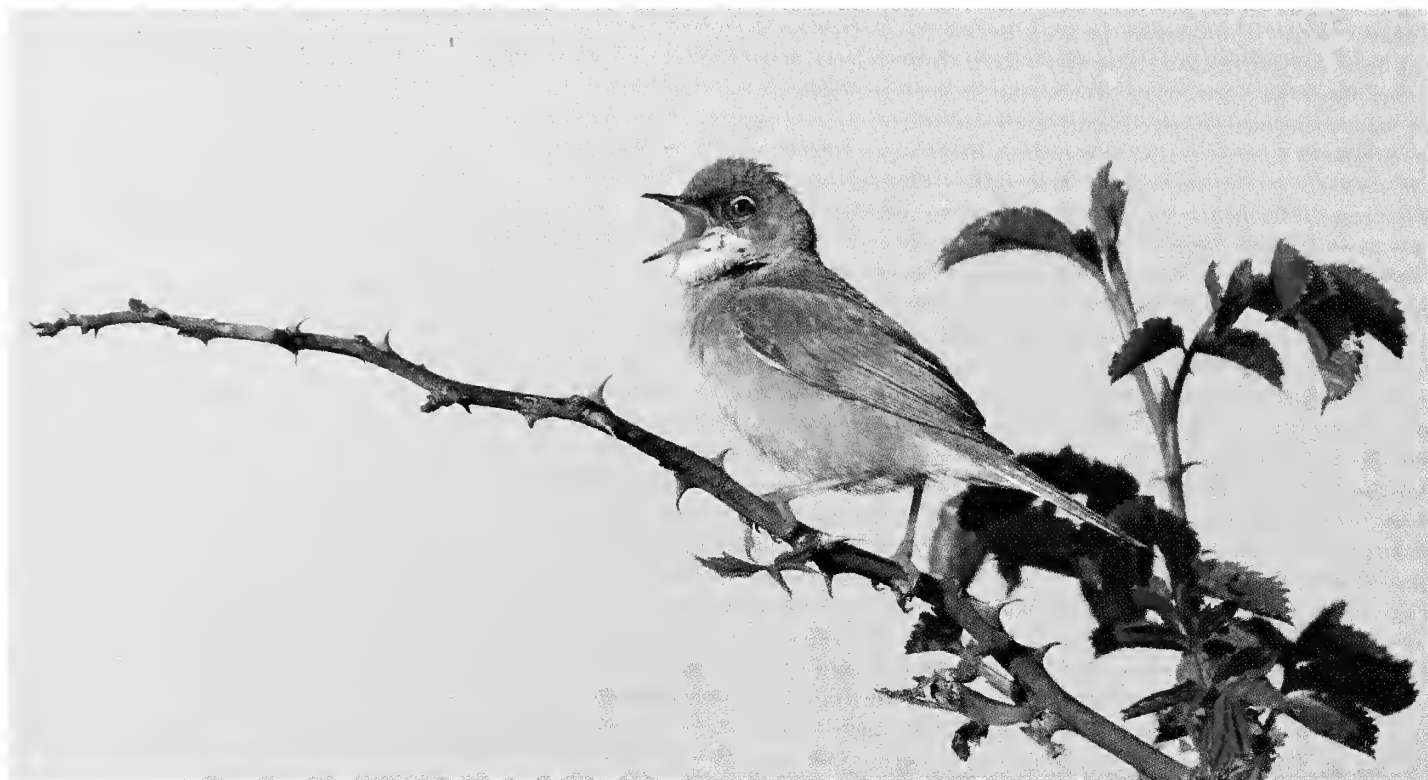
**Bridled Tern** *Onychoprion anaethetus* Fair Isle, 16th–19th June, presumed same Farne Islands (Northumberland), 20th June to 6th July. **White-winged Black Tern** *Chlidonias leucopterus* Cemlyn Bay (Anglesey), 16th–18th June, presumed same Seaforth (Lancashire & N Merseyside), 18th June. **Forster's Tern** *Sterna forsteri* Inishroo, Galway Bay (Co. Galway), 9th June. **Bonaparte's Gull** *Chroicocephalus philadelphia* Bowling Green Marsh (Devon), long-stayer to 21st June; Tresco (Scilly), 19th June. **Ross's Gull** *Rhodostethia rosea* Bowling Green Marsh, long-stayer to 6th July. **Laughing Gull** *Larus atricilla* Fair Isle, 19th June; Kilcoole (Co. Wicklow), 22nd June; Ballycotton (Co. Cork), 27th June to 5th July.

**Eurasian Scops Owl** *Otus scops* North Ronaldsay (Orkney), 15th–16th June; Yell (Shetland), 24th June. **European Bee-eater** *Merops apiaster* Portland, 10th June; Minsmere (Suffolk), two, 19th June. **European Roller** *Coracias garrulus* Warboys (Cambridgeshire), 21st June.

**Red-footed Falcon** *Falco vespertinus* Porthgwarra (Cornwall), 27th June to 1st July; Coward's Marsh (Dorset), 29th June.



Kit Day



**257.** Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata*, Burnham Overy, Norfolk, June 2014.

Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor* Unst (Shetland), 16th June to 6th July.

Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides* Tynninghame Bay (Lothian), long-stayer to 22nd June. Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* Burnham Overy (Norfolk), long-stayer to 18th June. Subalpine Warbler *Sylvia cantillans* Fair Isle, 13th June; North Ronaldsay, 17th–18th June. Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides* Long-stayers at Loch of Strathbeg, to 16th June; Walberswick (Suffolk), to 15th June. Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus*

*dumetorum* Scatness, 13th–14th June; Virkie (both Shetland), 13th–14th and 22nd June; Fair Isle, 13th and 25th–28th June (the latter the same as the second Virkie bird).

Rose-coloured Starling *Pastor roseus* Records from Anglesey, Co. Antrim, Argyll, Forth, Co. Galway, Highland, Lancashire & N Merseyside, Moray & Nairn, Northumberland, Outer Hebrides and Suffolk. Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia* Portland Bill, 13th June. Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola* Balnakeil (Highland), 18th–19th June.

Jim Dickson



**258.** White-throated Sparrow *Zonotrichia albicollis*, Otter Ferry, Argyll, June 2014.

Two-barred Crossbill *Loxia leucoptera* Tynninghame Bay, three long-stayers to 9th June, then seven on 10th June, two to 11th. White-throated Sparrow *Zonotrichia albicollis* Landguard (Suffolk), 19th June; Otter Ferry (Argyll), 19th–20th June. Rustic Bunting *Emberiza rustica* St Mary's (Scilly), 14th June.



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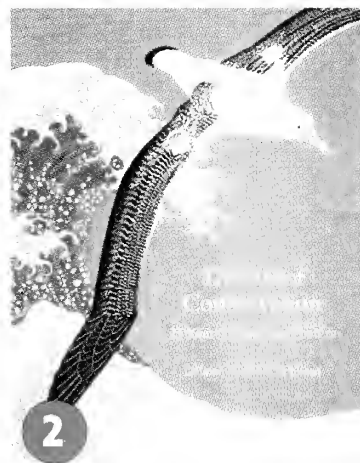
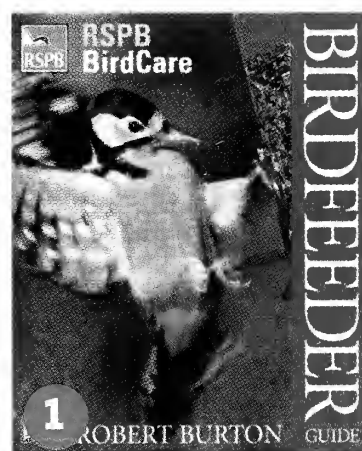
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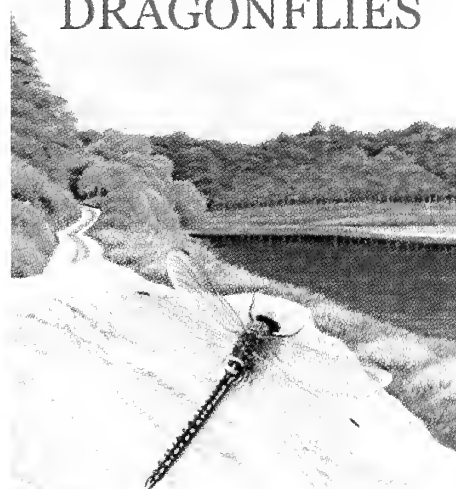
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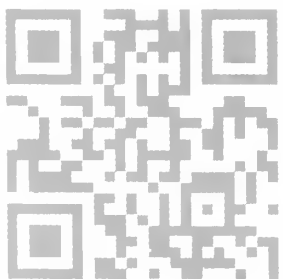
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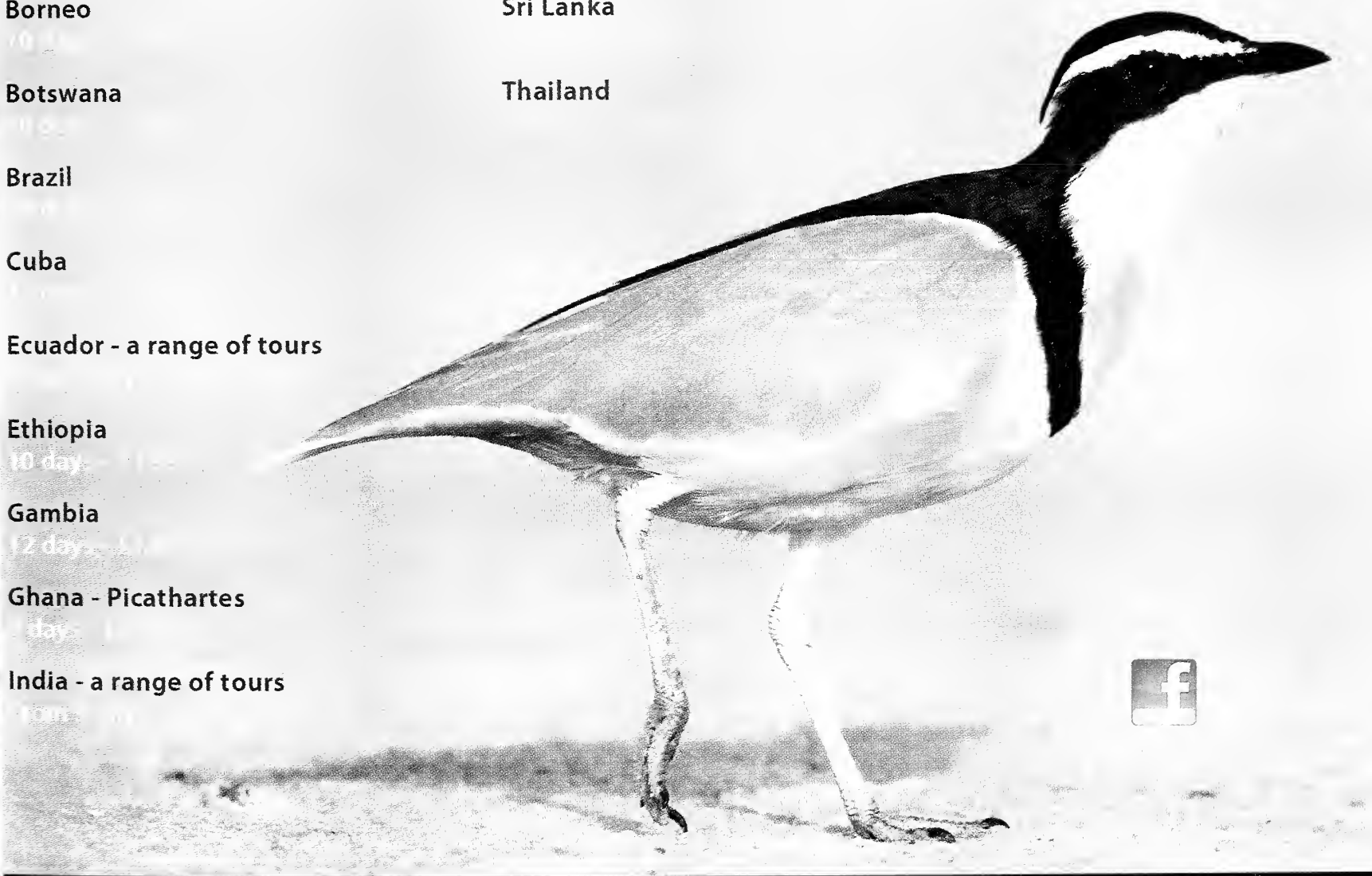




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